

ERIC BENTLEY'S DRAMATIC CRITICISM:
BACKGROUND AND THEORY

By

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A DISSERTATION PRESENTED TO THE GRADUATE COUNCIL OF THE
UNIVERSITY OF FLORIDA IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS
FOR THE DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

UNIVERSITY OF FLORIDA

1981

This is for Angelyn Wood, who supported the project in every sense of the word. And it is for James R. Carlson, the most comprehensive intellect I have encountered.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank Richard L. Green for chairing this dissertation and for the close reading and textual advice which has helped give it form. I also want to acknowledge L. L. Zimmerman, who sparked my interest in aesthetics. To Winifred L. Frazer, David L. Shelton, and Thomas B. Abbott go many thanks for serving on my committee.

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Abstract of Dissertation Presented to the Graduate Council of the
University of Florida in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the
Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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June, 1981

Chairman: Richard L. Green
Major Department: Speech

This study analyzes the sources and qualities of Eric Bentley's critical theory, a broad and sophisticated realism which emphasizes the sociological and psychological convergence of drama and life.

Chapter I examines Bentley's relationship to pragmatism, socialism, and Freudian psychology as they shape his humanist, positivist, and pluralist position, his essential anti-dogmatism and faith in the power of the mind to process the facts of experience. Bentley is linked with various literary critics, including John Crowe Ransom and F. R. Leavis, to show influences on his emphasis of the concrete closeness of literature to daily life. Bentley's view of aesthetic judgment is related to relativism, where judgment proceeds from the concrete examination of a value situation rather than from rules or subjective impressions.

Chapter II analyzes Bentley's dramatic theory in light of the categories used in modern aesthetics, focusing on the written drama as art work and the playwright as artist. In Bentley's view, the playwright explores experience through a struggle with form and content, unifying the two in a play that is both an imitation of life and an expression of the artist's vision. Form is used to feature content, and a well-formed structure is the playwright's major concern. The function of the drama is to give pleasure and to instruct; it has the social purpose of vitalizing an insensitive (bourgeois) society. Ideas and ethical content are important to this function and enter the drama both through the formulation of an intelligible structure and through focus on ideas as subject matter.

Bentley sees realism as the best form for the drama's necessary depiction of a dialectic of forces representative of ethical issues. Non-realistic elements will enter realistic works as a concomitant to the forming process of art. Bentley's ultimate defense of realism lies in drama's unique presentation of human essence in living human form. The audience's engagement with this form depends on some sense of detachment in observation, though the spectator will always view realistic characters in a play with the same identification and empathy common in life.

Chapter III deals with Bentley's treatment of performance, the presentation in the theatre of the playwright's commanding vision. The arts of the theatre are form for the drama as presented and are empty without it. He is suspicious of the power of the theatrical to

overcome the dramatic, of form over content. He recognizes acting as the central art of the theatre, and as an art, it cannot be merely naturalistic. Neither does the actor display his ordinary personality, but should develop an aesthetic personality. The director gives proper form to the drama, making manifest the qualities of the play. He may add or subtract when the play is deficient, but he should not take on the function of playwright with extraneous interpretations and formalist flourishes. Stage design has the aesthetic function of forming an expressive image in theatrical space, but lighting has only a functional purpose, that of exposing the actor.

Chapter IV examines selected New Republic reviews as examples of the applicability of Bentley's theory to specific works. Focus is on Bentley's relationship with American theatre, his discussion of its form/content problems and the play's correspondence with social concerns.

The Conclusion summarizes Bentley's vision of the drama as an expression of rational man's search for ethical value within a comprehensive social order and the need to continue this search in light of existing value systems.

INTRODUCTION

Few would dispute Eric Bentley's position as one of the major dramatic critics in post World War II America, a position solidified by more than twenty-five years of publication about the theatre. Even before he emerged as a drama critic, Bentley had shown promise as a student of literature and intellectual history at Oxford and Yale and had published frequently in magazines like The Kenyon Review. His first published book, A Century of Hero Worship,¹ was a study in the history of ideas and essentially his Yale dissertation.

He soon turned to dramatic criticism and produced The Playwright as Thinker,² a book which caused some furor and a good deal of negative reaction because its original introduction called Eugene O'Neill merely a "promising" playwright. Although the book contained a far more devastating criticism of the commercial Broadway theatre, the reference to O'Neill was seen by some as an attack on American theatre not only at its popular base, but also at its lofty pinnacle. The purpose of the book, Bentley has recently said, "was an attempt to dignify the theatre beyond what it normally claims, to say that it is a part of culture, that it is, among other things, an intellectual institution--or is at its best."³ Bentley maintained that a play could seriously be about something, and this conviction brought the criticism that he was interested in a cerebral theatre, whereas he was really only extending to theatre the same close and serious examination which was commonly afforded to poetry and fiction.

Following in the path of a critic whom he admired, F. R. Leavis, Bentley's next book was the re-evaluation of the reputation and work of an out-of-fashion author, Bernard Shaw. Bernard Shaw⁴ is a thorough critical analysis of Shaw's philosophy and dramatic works.

The next book, In Search of Theatre,⁵ is a collection of articles he wrote while studying the varieties of European and American theatre first hand, often working as a director or translator, and thus expanding his knowledge of the theatre. It demonstrates an increased awareness of theatrical embodiment while it retains and refines his commitment to realism.

During these years Bentley also formed a close association with Bertolt Brecht, becoming, for some time, Brecht's chief American promoter and unofficial press agent. The association was mutually beneficial, and Bentley was affected by Brecht's theories.

Bentley's years as the theatre critic for The New Republic (1952-1956) gave him a regular forum to discuss the American theatre and the occasion to review hundreds of productions. These reviews have been collected in The Dramatic Event and What Is Theatre?⁶ along with several additional essays.

Perhaps his most influential work during this period and later has been his frequent editorship of play anthologies whose selections and introductions have helped to reshape the content of drama and theatre courses in the universities and, one suspects, have had an impact on the programs of the expanding number of repertory theatres in America.

Bentley's most thorough study of the theatre, The Life of the Drama,⁷ is an examination of theatrical theory which relates, at every turn, the complex connection of the art to human psychosocial factors. Both it and his next book, The Theatre of Commitment⁸ (which contains the seminal essay on political theatre), as well as his previous volumes of essays and reviews, have remained almost continually in print, and one encounters his works in class syllabi in American colleges everywhere, suggesting continued wide interest in the whole of his work. In his most recent collection of essays, Theatre of War,⁹ he makes the transition from dramatic to social criticism complete, including essays about social and political life as well as dramatic criticism.

Mr. Bentley's prominence in academic circles--and subsequent influence--mark him as an important figure for study. His popularity suggests that his ideas and sensibilities have touched many. Even were Bentley not popular, had he written, for example, during a time less receptive to a critic of realism, a time more willing to ignore the critic who goes against the grain, the cogency and penetration of his analyses would make him worthy of study. He is of particular interest to students of criticism and theory because he has occasionally probed into the background of his own and others' critical work to try to make clear some of the assumptions behind the specific instances.

Though Bentley's work is used as a basis for much critical study, there have been no major studies of his theory, save his inclusion in Will Brewer Grant, Jr.'s Varieties of American Theatrical Criticism, 1945-1969.¹⁰ Mr. Grant's comparative study of four critics analyzes

their theories along the lines of M. H. Abrams' concept of the "pragmatic" approach to criticism and develops Martin Gottfried's distinction between "left wing" and "right wing" orientation in criticism. In labeling Bentley as a "left wing" critic, Grant works from definition and only suggests a philosophical or political base to a critic's orientation. The present study will examine in some detail the development of Bentley's critical position out of the intellectual and critical climate that was his training ground.

In addition to this vital background material, this study will provide a more extensive analysis of Bentley's dramatic theory than that of Grant's necessarily limited comparative study. Using the major areas of analysis common to the philosophy of art, I will thoroughly examine sources, standards, and implications of Bentley's rational and realist aesthetic.

Two assumptions ground the methodology of this study. The first is that a search for theory in the work of a critic is a valid preoccupation. Murry Krieger has spoken of the inevitable relationship between experience and theory:

. . . each of us carries with him, as he turns to experience a poem, some distillate of his earlier experiences of poems that acts as *an a priori* guide to his expectations, his interpretations, and his judgments. Conscious or unconscious, informed or uninformed, systematically worked out or ad hoc and piecemeal, this distillate still serves him, in effect, as his literary theory--even if it leads him to a disdain of the very notion of theory.¹¹

If something akin to theory develops even in the general consumer of a poem or a play, then it is even more the case in a sophisticated critic who has examined his experiences in detail.

The second assumption is that Bentley's critical output may be considered as a fairly homogeneous body of work where its theory is concerned. That is, I will be less concerned with the evolution of a theory, but will consider the major direction of Bentley's theory to have been set by the time of the publication of The Playwright as Thinker. When Bentley tells us in several introductions that his conclusions can and do change from time to time, I take it to be a publication of his pragmatic and situational orientation, that he is adapting and adjusting his theory to contain new experiences. Generally, the major body of his theory does not change, but merely expands to include new ideas. At times Bentley will accept a contradiction to his general theory, such as his conclusion that there will sometimes be a need for outright propaganda in the theatre. Except for an occasional essay in which he examines his own theory--the essay "What is Theatre" is the best example--Bentley maintains a commitment to perception over philosophy. Still, he is in close touch with the precepts which guide his aesthetic judgments, and they remain, throughout the work, consistent in the main.

This study will draw, therefore, from the major critical works in no particular order. The central importance of The Life of the Drama, his major work on theory, is unquestionable. Yet its ideas are extensions of earlier work and are echoed in later. At any rate, the developmental aspect of the theory, where it does appear, will be noted by this method.

Chapter I of this study will trace the influence of the philosophy behind his early published works, pragmatism, as it affects his view of art. It will then examine five critics whom Bentley has identified as influential on his development, among them John Crowe Ransom and his

New Criticism. Finally, Bentley's relativist aesthetic will be described in detail.

Chapter II will analyze the various elements of Bentley's realism as they apply to drama and art in general. Attention will be paid to creativity and aesthetic experience as well as to those areas internal to the art work such as form and cognitive content. Chapter III will follow with an analysis of Bentley's specific attitudes towards theatrical art: acting, directing, script interpretation, and theatricality.

Chapter IV will offer a more specific look at several critical pieces in order to examine Bentley's reactions to different kinds of content in relation to form. The Conclusion will summarize Bentley's dramatic theory and offer an evaluation of his work as a critic.

Let it be clear from the outset, however, that this study is basically positive in its appraisal of his criticism. Though Bentley has blind spots in his appreciations, he is aware of them and has explained them with well-articulated theory. And in practice he is always affirmative about the power of the theatre to move and serious about the importance of the art. His theories are essential to review at this point, in the light of the literature about theatre of the late 1960's and early 1970's which explains an art in which language, script, logic, planning, traditional unity, and reality have been pared down, fragmented, or actually stripped away. It is hoped that Bentley's theories will continue to stand alongside those of recent theorists such as Richard Schechner and David Cole in explicating a total aesthetic of the theatre.¹²

Notes

1. Eric Bentley, A Century of Hero Worship (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott Company, 1944) (Hereinafter referred to as Century.)
2. Eric Bentley, The Playwright as Thinker (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1967) (Hereinafter referred to as Thinker.)
3. Eric Bentley, private interview, Gainesville, Florida, February, 1978.
4. Eric Bentley, Bernard Shaw (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1976)
5. Eric Bentley, In Search of Theatre (New York: Vintage Books, 1957) (Hereinafter referred to as Search.)
6. Eric Bentley, The Dramatic Event (Boston: Beacon Press, 1954) (Hereinafter referred to as Event.); Eric Bentley, What Is Theatre? (Boston: Beacon Press, 1956) (Hereinafter referred to as What.)
7. Eric Bentley, The Life of the Drama (New York: Atheneum, 1957) (Hereinafter referred to as Life.)
8. Eric Bentley, The Theatre of Commitment (New York: Atheneum, 1967) (Hereinafter referred to as Commitment.)
9. Eric Bentley, Theatre of War (New York: The Viking Press, 1972) (Hereinafter referred to as War.)
10. Will Brewer Grant, Jr., Varieties of American Theatrical Criticism, 1945-1969 (Ph.D. dissertation, Cornell University, 1970.)
11. Murry Krieger, Theory of Criticism (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976), pp. 5-6.
12. Richard Schechner, Public Domain (New York: Avon Books, 1969); David Cole, The Theatrical Event (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1975.)

CHAPTER I PHILOSOPHY AND BACKGROUND

We discover beauty just as we discover the physical properties of things. Training is needed to make us expert in either line.

William James

Differing points of view about art may be related to differing beliefs about the world, to "intellectual, political, and social affinities."¹ These affinities, affected at the deepest level by universal conceptions or philosophy and more directly by aesthetic training, may be examined as the basis of a particular art theory. Eric Bentley's realist, rational, and humanist view of the drama may be traced to two such influential areas. One is comprised of his philosophical allegiance which centers broadly on the pragmatism of William James and includes a compatible politics of democratic socialism. The other consists of his study of and work in the field of literary criticism during the 1930's and 1940's.

In the following these areas are separated for purposes of discussion, and it may appear that pragmatism has been the guiding force in all of Bentley's studies. Certainly the basic precepts from pragmatism which he appears to have internalized by 1944 have been influential, but it is also likely that pragmatism functioned as a synthesizing factor for a number of impulses already strong in the young student who came to Yale from Oxford just as war was beginning in Europe. Bentley

was an undergraduate during the 'Marxist decade,' which was also a time of upheaval in the literary world, and it is reasonable to expect that he was well-informed about the most progressive philosophical, political, and literary theories at an early age.

It is therefore likely that philosophy and literature interacted in Bentley along several developing lines of belief which are best described by pragmatism so that pragmatism's humanism, empiricism, pluralism, and relativism dovetail with the emphasis on realism, methodology, the concrete, and the social perspective on art which are important to his aesthetics. Certainly these ideas can be related to Bentley's studies in literary criticism with C. S. Lewis, to his critiques of T. S. Eliot and I. A. Richards, to his association with John Crowe Ransom and the New Critics, and to his encomiastic investigation of the Cambridge (England) critic F. R. Leavis.

Pragmatism's essential empiricism and focus on the facts of experience speaks in favor of realism and the actual, the concrete.² It also allows the study of art, especially literature, as a kind of social document, welcoming the adoption of scientific methodologies from fields such as psychology, sociology, and anthropology in literary criticism.

The pluralistic universe and humanist basis of value in pragmatism send man on an extended value search; pragmatism is a methodology for guiding the individual through a world of actual experiences. Bentley, following F. R. Leavis, praises the methodological critic who decides through empirical testing and pragmatic reasoning what judgments about art are most valid. That these judgments are relative to individuals and societies, based on empirically derived standards and not on absolutes,

defines Bentley's relativism which is the focus of the last part of this chapter.

In pragmatism, all life is the accommodation of sensory experience in a wild and diverse universe; art, which offers an experience specially designed to be both complete and potent, is in the mainstream of living.³ Thus Bentley sees its purpose for the individual as active and meaningful (to the intellect as well as to the emotions, which are, in fact, linked) rather than as passive and purely emotional as in I. A. Richards.

For Bentley, art must be engaged with society through lived experience, and pragmatism's anti-authoritarianism and growth-orientation lead to the political side of Bentley's realism. The search for concrete and vivid experience in art becomes intertwined with ethics for, as Stephen Pepper says, "an artist seeks out social issues because they reflect conflicts and are sources of vivid realization of experience."⁴ The best art can hardly avoid some ethical content, for it is a deep reflection on the nature of the world.

Bentley's focus on the real and concrete lead him away from the mystical, the murky, and the abstract and towards the specific, the clear, and the crisp. His desire for social engagement and eye for ethical content lead him to consider the effete, the snobbish, the sentimental, the escapist, and the commercial beyond the pale of true art.

Like pragmatism itself, however, Bentley's realism is neither narrow nor exclusive. It is a broad avenue into which many ideas and styles may run. Methodologically he draws from psychology, sociology, and other areas as well as the central "close to the text" formalism of the New Critics.

The purpose of the present chapter is to examine the development of a realist aesthetic of the character suggested above. Part One will focus on Bentley's pragmatism as it appears in some early works, primarily Century of Hero Worship. Bentley's socialism will be related to and discussed as compatible with his pragmatism. Part Two will examine Bentley's relation to the five literary critics mentioned above, with whom he has had close association or about whom he has written. Part Three will examine Bentley's relativism as it appears as a methodology of aesthetic judgment, perhaps the clearest indication of the influence of pragmatism on his criticism.

Bentley's Pragmatism and Its Relation to Politics

When Eric Bentley recently said that his major philosophical interests since leaving Yale in 1941 have been "in Marxism on the one hand and Freudianism on the other," he implied that his early interest in pragmatism had come during the writing of his dissertation which was later published as Century of Hero Worship.⁵ Certainly the book opens the door to a continued interest in socialism and psychology, an interest fed by the methodology of pragmatism. This book, a study of the intellectual movement of Heroic Vitalism in such diverse artists and thinkers as Thomas Carlyle, Friedrich Nietzsche, Richard Wagner, Bernard Shaw, Oswald Spengler, Stefan George, and D. H. Lawrence, offers pragmatism as an answer to the philosophic dilemmas of the concerned intellectual in the modern world. Pragmatism helps Bentley sympathize with the Heroic Vitalists' quest for quality in a democratic and bourgeois world, ruled by the marketplace. At the same time, it leads him to abhor the extreme

individualism and authoritarianism of their conclusions which, in the worst of them, consist of a denial of democratic freedom in modern society and a rush to the airy and reserved world of the hero, the superman. The book offers a synthesis of the Heroic Vitalists' concerns with those of democratic liberalism, centering on the question of leadership: how does the democratic state develop leaders of quality, men of superior intellect and talent? "The great question," says Bentley, "is whether democracy is in every respect anti-aristocratic."⁶ His conclusion is implicit in the statement, "Aristocracy is one of the goals of democracy."⁷

Along the way to this conclusion, Bentley offers a vast analysis of the lives, times, and works of the authors studied. He demonstrates formidable powers of psychological analysis and, at every hand, touts, in a piecemeal fashion, pragmatism. In his review of the book, Kenneth Burke called for a chapter which

would have considered systematically the philosophic points that are continually being introduced *en passant*. Particularly the scattered remarks on pragmatism make one wish that the author had told us just what key propositions, in his opinion, characterize this movement which he evidently considers of signal importance. . . .⁸

With the whole of Bentley's critical work in mind, this can be done to some extent, for the pragmatism, far-reaching in its influence as I have suggested above, is centrally exhibited and related to the politics of the book. It is difficult to tell how extensive a study Bentley made of William James, less so of John Dewey, for he never elucidates pragmatism but merely refers to it (as Burke suggests above). Yet perhaps the major strokes of Jamesian pragmatism are all the more strong for having touched such a responsive chord in Bentley in so elemental a form.

Certainly pragmatism forms a core of faith for Bentley in the book, for he is drawn to belief even though he is skeptical of it, especially absolute belief. William James stands out in high relief and is the most-quoted philosopher in the book (except for those who have direct influence on the figures of the study, such as Hegel and Schopenhauer.) Bentley often relates James and Bernard Shaw, whom he identifies as another pragmatist. As a working system, pragmatism is often seen in political terms as well as in more general terms. Since the book is about ideas as they impact on the world, it is necessarily politically oriented; the general precepts of pragmatism often fuse with their political importance.

Bentley sees the central coherence of pragmatism's flexible methodology in the unification of activity and value, i.e., the development of value in a world which is man-centered and diverse. This he makes clear in a summation of the centralizing and synthesizing aspect of pragmatism in modern ethics:

In the matter of Heroic Vitalism, James and Shaw represent a position between the two contemporary extremes, the extremes reached by Tolstoy and Nietzsche who found the new world disgusting and saw only the alternative of outright paganism or outright Christianity--activity without values or values without activity. James and Shaw united activity with values. They represent what is positive in science but not what is hampered by hard and fast categories and narrow determinism. They are "positivists" in a broad sense but utterly opposed to mechanistic explanations of non-mechanical phenomena. They give status alike to Baconian experiment and to reason but surpass the earlier rationalism and empiricism in the firm yet elastic method of pragmatism. Their theory of truth is relativistic, but they know that what is relatively true is not necessarily mere subjective fantasy but can be objective and worthy of a fiery faith.⁹

Here, within a humanistic framework, are the positivism, empiricism, and relativism which are central to pragmatism's world view. Value emerges

from human activity; it does not exist as absolute doctrine, whether it be the extreme of a supernatural or rationalist doctrine. Bentley supports pragmatism's humanist debunking of pure scientific determinism. Neither science nor reason can absolutely designate reality since reality is neither a unit nor an abstraction; reality depends upon human definition. Within this view, truth must be relative, but the relatively true, tested, examined, and held up to standards, may be taken seriously and objectively (though not absolutely). Since relative truth is continually being discovered, progressivism, the developmental nature of pragmatism, is inherent in the formulation.

This is the general view of pragmatism appearing in Century. Four important ideas are repeatedly dealt with in this formulation: 1) a basic empiricism in understanding nature and man; 2) a pluralistic view of the world with an abhorrence of dualities and absolutes; 3) a humanist and relativist view of value; and 4) an emphasis on mind or intellect in processing experience. Let us examine how these ideas appear in the book and elsewhere.

Bentley's empiricism is perhaps most clear in his psychological analysis of the growth of the idea of Heroic Vitalism in the individuals studied. Bentley's research into personality is based on scientific methods, a rough Freudianism, and faith in the analytic powers of the rational intellect. Like Freud, he is concerned with mental conflict often of unconscious origin. The developmental pattern of conflict and resolution is common in Bentley's manner of thinking. He offers his psychological analysis not as shallow literary criticism, but as a key to understanding the relationship between experience and ideas:

By this time we have lost patience with the psychoanalytical method of criticism which says: Shelley wrote that because of his Oedipus complex, or: Carlyle worshiped heroes because of his indigestion. . . . However, we must not ignore the fact that biography is just as essential a part of cultural history as economics or philosophy . . . one can show why a particular person's experience called for a certain view of life; one can show how an idea grew in an individual. . . . 10

Psychology is a natural science. It offers the possibility of in-depth investigation wherein the investigator is able to discover the truth about ideas by examining them at the source. The essential conflict-resolution pattern by which men may grow is, at once, Freudian, Hegelian, and pragmatic. Where there is imbalance, balance will be sought. Opposite sides of an issue will be brought together so that the good in each side may be kept in the resolution, at least ideally.

Bentley's tone in Century is that of the enthusiastic but objective researcher. The Freudian emphasis on sex is prevalent, as are the Freudian repressions and substitutions that resolve conflict. He links Carlyle's authoritarianism to his probable sexual impotence, and he discusses the impact of Stefan George's repressed homosexuality on his poems and followers: "Whether George . . . would confess to homosexuality is irrelevant except insofar as unconscious homosexuality is subtler in its manifestations than the conscious sort."¹¹

It is the prevalence of unresolved conflicts in character, often dealt with in their writing, which Bentley suggests led to so many illiberal conclusions on the part of the Heroic Vitalists. The most common conflict--perhaps he would consider it a basic conflict--Bentley finds is that between "masculine-feminine," and it may have various sources. In Carlyle he sees it as stemming from the loss of Christian faith and its replacement by a faith in science which later develops into an unresolved

duality of character, the old feminine never quite dominated by the new masculine. Bentley reads much of Carlyle as an unconscious attempt to work out this conflict. He finds similar conflicts in Nietzsche, George, Lawrence, and Wagner, linking conflict to literary and artistic production. Conflict, for example, is seen as the basis of Wagner's art: "In his music-dramas, Wagner confronts himself."¹²

Bentley displays a prodigious capacity for analyzing personality as a method for understanding biography, history, and ideas. Psychology is central in his study of man. Though his psychology is influenced strongly by Freud, he does not demonstrate absolute faith in Freudian theory. He remains pragmatic in his methodology. Psychology gives Bentley a method for studying development, and the active component of psychology, psychoanalysis, promises results that also ring true to pragmatism: understanding and new levels of awareness. Psychology also helps fix the dialectical pattern in his thinking, crucial to a dramatic view of the world.

Bentley makes it clear that his abhorance of both dualism and dogmatism are grounded in his pluralist world view. He calls Carlyle's suppressed belief in Heaven and Hell "a naive and dangerous dualism which cancels the utility of Carlyle's incipient pragmatism."¹³ Belief in a dualism is by definition an acceptance of extremes, an over-simplified polarity which does not take a greater diversity and the possibility of many centrist positions into account. Dualism is thus the parent of an absolute view: "when the heaven-hell pattern pervades a man's thought it makes him an extremist, a man of insane ruthless reasoning, one ignorant

of the great civilizing principle of the golden mean."¹⁴ Faced with an "either . . . or" argument or situation, Bentley will prefer some synthesis, central or combined position. He applauds the "both . . . and" pattern in Shaw, a bringing together rather than a splitting apart, inclusiveness rather than exclusiveness.¹⁵

Bentley clarifies his philosophical and political stand against dualism and for pluralism when he links Romanticism with pragmatism. Bentley's view of Romanticism is mixed, separating its world view from its aesthetics. He favors the Romantic concept of man forging value in a diverse world, fighting to keep the human spirit free from the stultifying conventions of society. This is much like pragmatism. He does not accept the dualism of the Romantic view of art in which the artist reaches out from the imperfect world to capture the eternal ideal. Bentley approves of Romanticism's view of nature, not its metaphysics; he is impressed with its political rather than its aesthetic content.

Bentley criticizes as anti-Romantic those politically conservative thinkers, like T. S. Eliot, because their "values are fixed, and fixity is their faith, their touchstone, and their panacea."¹⁶ Such fixity is inimical to a pluralist view of the world with its capacity for novelty, change, and growth. He finds the hidden desire of the anti-Romantic is for

a faith that is systematic and certain, a society that is hierarchic and static. What is it they most dread? The world of contingency, flux, and diversity. As there is an inner connection between Romanticism and pragmatism, so there is between neoclassicism and philosophic idealism.¹⁷

Again, Bentley is not speaking here about art but about the real world and politics. Romantic reality was pluralistic while classical reality was fixed by a higher absolute.

For Bentley, then, the pragmatism of William James is "the culmination of Romanticism" and James is "the man who made articulate what the earlier Romantics were groping after . . . the man who built into a philosophy and a method what had previously been a series of hints, images, and intuitions."¹⁸ He quotes James in an impassioned statement about the unification of ideal and real in a world where absolute laws, abstract concepts, and arguments based on absolute knowledge do not pertain: "Dramatic unities; laws of versification; ecclesiastical systems; scholastic doctrines. Bah! . . . those who do insist that the ideal and the real are dynamically continuous are those by whom the world is to be saved."¹⁹

For Bentley, values are not pre-ordained in a world that is diverse, wild, and full of possibilities; therefore, man becomes the center of the pragmatic value search. He makes this clear when he compares what is good in Nietzsche's theory of value to James:

The positive upshot of the theory of value which we have looked at is that values are "free," are created, are man made. Thus the dignity of which man had been deprived by eighteenth-century science and Darwinism alike is restored to him by Nietzsche, as by William James. . . .²⁰

This is the humanist base of pragmatic value. It is relativist in that man made values are not taken to be mere subjective desires, but are derived from beliefs which are tested and developed by pragmatic reasoning. This explains the crucial contribution of the rational mind to pragmatism and its search for truth. Rationality also carries a hint for a social basis for value, rather than the purely individualistic one in Nietzsche. Whereas the Romantics tended to distrust the mind and society as limiting to the free spirit, Bentley--and pragmatism--put much faith in rational inquiry and the social view.

Bentley sees the rational mind as the key for opening man's awareness of and contact with the real world. This corresponds to his concept of man, "the animal that thin's," as central to the universe. He criticizes the Heroic Vitalists for their leaps past rationality, and he cites Shaw's highly critical analysis of the Heroic Vitalists' illusions about heroism and courage as an example of how pragmatic realism may rightly debunk airy nonsense. This debunking does not, however, lessen individual human value, for "to say so would be to reject the striving after self-conquest by pragmatic reasoning which has been the major endeavor of mankind during the past two hundred years."²¹ Pragmatism is a method of using the rational mind (which, however, is not unconnected to the emotions), and it is the Heroic Vitalists' emphasis on the "primacy of the 'Unconscious'" which Bentley soundly criticizes, saying that it produces a theory of knowledge "in which intuition is too naively exalted above reason. . . ."²²

It is Bentley's pervasive rationality combined with the pragmatic, socialist, and progressivist sense of the individual's connection to the group that underlies his criticism of the Heroic Vitalists and leads to the thesis of Century: that within the context of a democratic society intellectual capacity is functionally useful, and individuals of intellect should be raised to a position of leadership as a service to society as a whole. This constitutes a form of elitism, but it is not rigid and objective. The intellectual is not born, he is developed, and that which sets him apart from society is exactly what should lead him back to it, for his engagement with society is not a debt to be paid, but ideally comes from a desire to serve. The model is that of democratic socialism

wherein responsibility and sharing are the cohesive forces of society. Respect for individual liberty is balanced by the needs of the collective.

Thus the pluralism and humanism of pragmatism ground, or are compatible with, Bentley's politics. Bentley's liberalism is easily explained by pragmatism, in contrast to modes of thought which are authoritarian. The liberal mind is pluralistic, dealing with diversity through a pragmatic process of validation. The illiberal mind tends to be dualist, understanding only one path as opposed to another: it must be this or that, with one generally labeled good and the other bad. A vast and diverse universe must be reduced to comply with the dualism, and the dualist must take extreme positions which may be the basis of dogmatism.

Pragmatism guides Bentley in giving importance to both the freedom of the individual and the needs of the collective. His Marxism is not antithetical to pragmatism, at least where it does not take on the cast of an absolutism. For, as we have said, Bentley lacks the religious turn of mind necessary for complete faith in systems such as Freud's or Marx's. Bentley has stated his caution with Communism as it is practiced by the Party in various countries, even while he remains a socialist:

Still, there is, I believe, another constant in my viewpoint besides liberalism: I am a socialist and have been for thirty years. If my attitude to the Communist Party has varied, that, surely, need not be viewed as purely my problem. Not being a member of it, nor otherwise awestruck, I propose to judge each of its policies on its merits. I shall be anti-Communist if that means I shall on occasion oppose measures which this Communist Party or that advocates; I shall not be anti-Communist if that is to imply that all decisions of all Communist Parties are bound to be wrong or that "Communism" is a good name for all that is bad and is therefore the opposite of a "freedom" which embodies all that is good.²³

This attitude would not be sufficient, in the eyes of most Communists, to admit Bentley into the group. Certainly his attitude toward Communist

policy is pragmatic. One must presume that his socialism is gradualist or Shavian in form.

And yet the connection between Marxism and pragmatism is considerable. Bentley sees Marxism as compatible with democracy, as when he speaks of "the vast strength that came to democratic ideas from Marxism."²⁴ Bentley's great concern for the individual's responsibility to society is certainly Marxist. Pragmatism and Marxism have a similar world view. Both are essentially realist and empiricist. Both are progressive and positivistic. Both extoll the importance of education. Many pragmatist philosophers have seen the two as compatible, though John Dewey is said to have considered Marxism a "theology."²⁵ Stripped of its revolutionary nature based on the imperatives of historical materialism and the class struggle, a nature which at times fosters complete ethical and moral subjugation to the propagation of communism, Marxism has much in common with pragmatism.

Bentley in essence grafts the pragmatic method onto his socialism, judging the Party's policies individually. He is not a Marxist critic of the dogmatic sort, bending every aesthetic judgment to fairly narrow and absolute social-moral requirements. In the general view, however, Bentley's aesthetic is not far distant from the Marxist as described by Lucien Goldmann:

... the dialectical aesthetic sees every work of art as the expression . . . of a world vision; and . . . as we would expect, this vision also expresses itself on numerous other philosophical and theological levels, as well as on that of men's everyday actions and activity. The essential criteria by which the aesthetic of dialectical materialism judges the value of any expression of a world vision are the inner coherence of the work of art and especially the coherence between form and content. It also, however, has another criterion, corresponding on the philosophical plane to that of truth, and which enables a hierarchy of values to be set up between the different aesthetic expressions of world visions. This criterion is what the artistic

theories of dialectical materialism call the "degree of realism," implying by this the richness and complexity of the real social relationships which are reflected in the imaginary world created by the artist or writer. 26

Bentley would agree with both criteria, at least to the point where the "hierarchy of values" would be fully fixed and dogmatically applied. Bentley remains pragmatic and pluralist in the face of dogma. Also--and this is critical--the political hegemony of the Communist Party seems to lack the possibility for growth which Bentley associates with conflict. His wariness as regards Communism is understandable, as is his sympathy for the concepts of equality and social justice which are central to both Marx and William James.

Such is the philosophical base of Bentley's realism. Like the arch-realist Aristotle, whom he resembles in philosophy, Bentley looks for the depiction of social reality in dramatic art and finds "thought" or intellectual and ethical/value content to adhere to such a view. This is the thrust of Bentley's early pragmatism, and it is well supported by his studies in psychology and socialism.

As a drama critic, Bentley stands in close relationship to his own thesis in Century. His book is about the responsibility of the intellectual to society, and it is clear that he considers himself to be among those about whom he writes. The role of a critic is that of an intellectual who takes on a guiding or leading function in society. The man of superior intellect shares his taste and insight with the public in order to better the quality of art which is consumed. Century supports with an extended theory the line of work chosen by Bentley.

His most basic guide remains his anti-dogmatism, the rejection of rigidity in looking and thinking. Like William James, he is an optimistic

thinker. Bentley's is a mind well suited to enter the arena of dramatic criticism: pluralistic, complex, serious, analytic, untrammeled by emotionalism or absolutism, and sensitive to conflict and resolution as a mode of thinking.

Bentley's Background in Literary Criticism

In accord with his methodological orientation and penchant for pluralism, Bentley has not followed one school of criticism or had one particular mentor. He has said of his early studies in criticism: "I was getting very close to different critical points of view: Lewis, then later Leavis and of course Ransom. I tried to learn from them all without giving complete allegiance to any."²⁷ The five critics studied here do not represent all those whom Bentley has digested and from whom he has presumably learned. The three mentioned above, however, are, by his own admission, central and crucial. They are, in addition to the direct influence they have had on Bentley, representative of a climate of literary opinion and practice in which Bentley's ideas and opinions developed. If Lewis, Leavis, and Ransom are three critics with whom Bentley has had a great deal of contact, Eliot and Richards are two major critics with whom he could not avoid some confrontation. He has written about all five, though less about Ransom who may, in a manner unanalyzed by Bentley himself, have influenced him most.

This study of the five critics will focus on the development of an active, realist literary theory. This is to say that Bentley relates to ideas in these five critics which are similar to those then developing in

his philosophical outlook. The nature of man and society, man's expression through art and literature, and the relationship of art to society are the general areas to which the discipline of literary criticism offered specific insights. Bentley was predisposed to follow views which emphasized seriousness, meaning, objectivity, intellect, and the connections among various phenomena.

As a developing realist, he has been especially concerned about the manner in which literature is a way of knowing the world of reality and the manner in which ideas, values, and emotional qualities enter the literary work. This interest has led him toward views of the objective, cognitive, and concrete in literature. As a developing contextualist, he has been concerned about the effect of the literary work on its public and about the nature of aesthetic judgment.²⁸ This has reinforced his realism and social consciousness by directing him toward ideas of an active aesthetic experience involving both mind and emotions. It has also led him toward aesthetic judgments which are based on relativist criteria.

The general concern for the value of art lies behind all these interests. Bentley identifies the need to re-establish the importance of literature for a new age as the background of the broad movement which John Crowe Ransom called the New Criticism.²⁹ The continued rise of democracy and the breakdown of rigid class structure in post-industrial Europe and America--to some extent the same pressures that led to the hero-worship of the Heroic Vitalists--removed literature from its special, aristocratic niche and led to widespread commercialism and ignorance. In a scientific age, science was seen to have a monopoly on truth; literature was relegated to the status of either a pastime or a convenient

vehicle for moralizing. This denigration of the arts accounts for what Bentley sees as the pedagogical fervor of the New Critics:

All were concerned to assert that literature was not less important in this unliterary age than formerly, to point from the many things literature is connected with to the thing that it is, to defend, as Eliot put it, the integrity of literature.³⁰

The New Critics' primary impulse in defending the "integrity" of literature was to consider it as a separate way of knowing the world, separate from other areas such as entertainment and morals, with which it had been closely related. As Eliot put it, "the problem appearing in these essays, which gives them what coherence they have, is the problem of the integrity of poetry, with the repeated assertion that when we are considering poetry we must consider it as poetry and not another thing."³¹ The close consideration of the literary text as literature, that is, as a way of knowing reality, gave rise to the tendency to focus exclusively on the formal coherence of the literary work which has become the earmark of the New Criticism, narrowly defined as those critics identified by Ransom or working under his banner. (Bentley, in the introduction to The Importance of Scrutiny, seems to use the term more broadly to indicate most informed modern criticism.) The New Criticism has been called "the most influential method of our time," though it hardly constitutes a specific method other than extremely close textual reading which has been called "formalism."³²

Perhaps the major thing to which literature, in the view of the New Critics, had been wedded was morals. We have seen how moral and ethical values may become involved in art, but this is not to say that literature and morals are one. The propensity of the scientific mind,

however, was to relegate to science all cognitive knowledge and to art all affect. Along with this came the relegation of literature to the realm, not so much of morals, but of moralizing, as a method for transmitting a particular moral view. This is very different from the open value-search through experience which is a modern, orthodox (and pragmatic) view of art. Bentley notes the influence of the French critic Remy de Gourmont on Eliot: "L'art est incompatible avec une préoccupation morale ou religieuse."³³ The reaction against moralism is influential on the New Critics' efforts to focus on the work and not on peripheral factors.

The New Critics sought to establish the importance of literature as a separate way of dealing with the world's evidence. Ransom himself developed his theories along the lines of the cognitive importance of literature. The interest in science of the period, indeed, the vast extension of the methods of science into the study of man, was also directly influential on New Criticism (broadly defined) in the infusion of methods from fields such as anthropology, psychology, and sociology into literary criticism. Modern criticism has been called "The Armed Vision" because of its "organized use of non-literary techniques and bodies of knowledge to obtain insights into literature."³⁴

All five of the critics studied here share at least some of the concerns of the New Criticism. The following arrangement is roughly chronological, based on the order in which Bentley apparently studied, knew, or wrote about them.

C. S. Lewis

Bentley's mentor at Oxford, Lewis was a specialist in Medieval and Renaissance literature, a Christian, an author of fantastic tales, a philosophical idealist, and a bit of a mystic.³⁵ Very little of this seems to have interested Bentley. Lewis was, however, committed to the study of meaning in literature and, in addition, probably influenced Bentley's early ideas about the relationship between psychology and literature. Bentley wrote, under Lewis, his first book-length manuscript, a study of the use of psychology in modern criticism. The ideas in this treatise, including a negative view of I. A. Richards, parallel Lewis' evaluations. It is also probable that the acrimonious debate and argumentation which prevailed at Oxford and around Lewis had a lifelong effect on Bentley.

Lewis considered literature to be a content bound up with an artistic form. He said that "taking art as an expression, it must be the expression of something: and one can't abstract the 'something' from the expression."³⁶ The something which is expressed in the literary art work relates more clearly than expression in other arts to the world outside the work: "The first note of a symphony demands attention to nothing but itself. The first word of the Iliad directs our minds to anger; something we are acquainted with outside the poem and outside literature altogether."³⁷ Literature, being made up of language, is bound to a relationship with reality. This sets language arts apart from the arts in general and constitutes a common sense semiotics in which the real world is an important component of "meaning."

Lewis, in the fashion of New Criticism, debunks critical writing about the author: "A book ought to be judged on its own merits rather than as a means whereby one steeps oneself in the personality of the author."³⁸ Lewis criticizes the simplistic return of the Freudian critic to a few basic motifs (usually sex) as reductive and of little use to criticism. Even if we could show, he says, that the enjoyment of Book IV of Paradise Lost was 90 percent sex and 10 percent interest in gardens,

that 10 would still be the subject of literary criticism. For clearly the 10 is what distinguishes one poem from another--the 90 being a monotonous continuum spread under all our reading alike and affording no ground for the distinction we actually draw between banality and freshness, dullness and charm, ugliness and beauty. 39

Lewis responds positively, however, to the unveiled mystery of Jungian myth as related to literature in Maud Bodkin's seminal Archtypal Patterns in Poetry: "A much more civil and humane interpretation of myth and imagery is, however, advanced by Jung, and one which in the pages of Miss Bodkin . . . has found some interesting critical expressions."⁴⁰

Bentley's book on psychological criticism follows Lewis' evaluations. Bentley says,

I think my youthful point of view was that Richards and Freud were much too limited, and the answer was Jung. I was not to think that later. Maud Bodkin's book had appeared, and it opened up a lot of literature to me; she was the heroine of my treatise. 41

In later years Bentley, as he says, turned away from the somewhat mystical Jung and followed Freud's more empirical hypotheses, developing and using an extensive Freudian vocabulary in a manner unlike the reductive simplicity of that kind of Freudian criticism which Lewis rightly depreciated.

Dissent and debate were seen by Lewis as a method for testing ideas, and so he felt that discussion of an ideological sort could only strengthen a grasp on truth. It could firm one's conceptions or even lead to synthesis. Bentley says that Lewis loved debate and that he once saw Lewis and Richards debate their views on literature. "Lewis loved the process," he says, "though Richards was not really up to the cut and parry of debate."⁴²

It is possible, then, that Bentley's positive attitude toward conflict and its necessary presence in a pluralistic, growth-oriented world was learned at Oxford. His fondness for debate and dialectic, of ideas confronting ideas, seen in his admiration for playwrights like Shaw and Brecht and his mistrust of ideological vagueness, could have been easily spawned by the atmosphere of debate and argument at Oxford in the 1930's.⁴³

Bentley certainly developed away from Lewis in the decade after he left Oxford in 1939. In the 1948 preface to Scrutiny he criticizes Lewis for "a very unsatisfactory conception of two central matters: tradition and taste."⁴⁴ That is, Lewis reveres the old for serious study (tradition) and leaves new literature to be read as one may, outside the area of serious inspection. Like a good pragmatist, Bentley sees tradition in a relationship between past and present and emphasizes the need to deal critically with modern literature in order to engage one's self with contemporary life.

T. S. Eliot

Bentley admires Eliot's early criticism, that of the 1920 introduction to The Sacred Wood in which he proposed "to halt at the frontier

of metaphysics or mysticism. . . ." By 1928, when Eliot had "passed on to a larger and more difficult subject . . . that of the relation of poetry to the spiritual and social life of its time and other times," Bentley disapproves.⁴⁵ His comment on Eliot's shift is terse: "I do not think Eliot's dealings with the 'larger and more difficult subject' have been very satisfactory."⁴⁶ Eliot's heavily Christian and increasingly reactionary politics are the obvious source of Bentley's displeasure.

Bentley damns Eliot's politics, on the philosophical level, because his pragmatism conflicts with Eliot's narrowly neoclassical, idealist standards. Yet the difference in philosophy seems to bother Bentley only when Eliot applies these standards to society and not when they are applied to literature. Bentley accuses Eliot of confusing his artistic gifts with social-critical gifts, leading to a grave error, "the infusion of aesthetic standards into history."⁴⁷ Certainly, however, Bentley applies his own aesthetic philosophy (imbued as it is with social concerns) to history and society. What Bentley is perhaps saying is that he continues to appreciate Eliot's poetry while disliking his philosophy, more apparent in the social criticism than in the creative work. This may be because Eliot, a gifted poet, achieves such crisp and imagistic poetry whereas his philosophy seems to Bentley to be dogmatic, inflexible, elitist, and insensitive.

The difference may relate to Eliot's basic insights into poesy, developed in the early criticism. There he defines his famous concept of the "objective correlative," whereby emotion enters poetry through the specific and the concrete. Poetry is not mushy, it is not gush, it is not the direct cry of emotion:

The only way of expressing emotion in the form of art is by finding an "objective correlative"; in other words, a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events which shall be the formula of that particular emotion; such that when the external facts, which must terminate in sensory experience are given, the emotion is immediately evoked. 48

Whatever personal reasons Eliot may have had for the articulation of this concept, it demands concrete presentation in the poem, even for symbols of the non-concrete. This is meaningful for Bentley because it begins to link emotion--and ideas--to specific objects which may be examined by the intellect. In a similar manner Eliot suggests that the concrete is used in literature to deal with ideas: 'The poet can deal with philosophical ideas, not as a matter for argument, but as a matter for inspection.'⁴⁹

The objectification of emotion and ideas becomes a key concept for Bentley who quotes William James to show that the aesthetic validity of Shaw's moral content lies in its concrete presence:

William James . . . hit upon one of the essentials of Shaw, to wit, "the way he brings home to the eyes, as it were, the difference between 'convention' and 'conscience. . . .'" The difference between convention and conscience is certainly a moral matter, but Shaw is a concrete moralist . . . he is a genuine dramatist in that he brings his matter home to the eyes. . . . 50

I. A. Richards

Richard's studies in semantics and aesthetics led him to question the "objective" nature of the concrete in literature and literature's relationship to reality and truth. Convinced that only science and philosophy used language to accurately describe reality, he developed an aesthetic based on "synaesthesia," his term for the hypnotic state of emotional balance and harmony reached by individuals as a response to

art works. He also coined the term "pseudo-statement" to distinguish literary language from scientific; science makes actual statements, while literature does not. The aim of science is to refer to reality, while the aim of literature is to affect the emotions:

A statement may be used for the sake of the reference, true or false, which it causes. This is the scientific use of language. But it may also be used for the sake of the effects in emotion and attitude produced by the reference it occasions. This is the emotive use of language. ⁵¹

Richards says that "Poetry . . . is the supreme form of emotive language."⁵² He considers his theory to serve literature by cutting it free from the restrictive world of science: "A pseudo-statement, as I use the term, is not necessarily false in any sense. It is merely a form of words whose scientific truth or falsity is irrelevant to the purpose at hand."⁵³ Freed from a responsibility to truth, literary art can become supremely important to the affective human being.

The concept of a literature that does not say or mean anything, based on a serene and wholly subjective aesthetics, did not find favor with even the young Eric Bentley. In an article taken from the thesis he wrote at Oxford, Bentley viciously attacked Richards for the subjective and non-scientific nature of his account of literary value: "It is inconsistent. It is inapplicable to criticism. It is bound up with unsubstantiated psychology."⁵⁴ He attacked the root concept of "synesthesia," offering his own view of aesthetic value: "But, it might be argued, it is the change in consciousness that one enjoys and values, not what one changes to."⁵⁵

Bentley's active, vigorous concept of aesthetic effect conforms to his developing pragmatism and its orientation toward change, growth,

and vivid experience. It is also in the tradition of Aristotle's catharsis which posits the attainment of a balanced state as a final result of aesthetic experience but emphasizes the awareness of the change as primary to the experience. The spectator is to feel something strongly, to move from one state to another, to achieve a kind of enlightenment through change.

Bentley attacked Richards at his weakest point, his burdensome, subjectivist aesthetic which separated literature so decisively from the real world that it left it empty.

John Crowe Ransom

There are quite striking similarities between the literary theories of Ransom and Bentley who was Ransom's younger colleague at The Kenyon Review for several years. Foremost among them is Ransom's strong belief in the cognitive importance of literature and his avowed intellectualism in aesthetics based on literature's objective, meaningful nature. Ransom believes that poetic discourse is ontologically different from science, but no less cognitive in its meaning.

Ransom's criticism of Richards is, therefore, similar to Bentley's in its source: Richards' subjective emphasis. He says that "Richards is an anti-intellectualist aesthetician, and for him the characteristic activity of the emotions and attitudes is out of sight of their cognitions."⁵⁶ Ransom opposes this by stressing the "cognitive object" which is the distinctive, concrete presence in which the quality of the poem resides: "The distinctiveness that we think of as attaching to an emotion belongs really to the object towards which we have it."⁵⁷

Ransom separates poetry from science as a way of knowing reality by noting that science has a narrow and directive structure concerned only with logical relationships, argument, hypotheses, and reasoning. It is abstract and general. Poetic discourse, on the other hand, is broad and more like the world of reality, showing a "diffuseness of interest," and focusing on concrete objects and situations. Poetry contains both kinds of discourse: a logical argument called "structure," and a localized particularity known as "texture," which "testifies to a diffuseness in the constitution of the world which we are undertaking to know."⁵⁸

Thus poetry is not only real, it is more real than science, for it contains the concrete situations of texture and is not limited to the abstraction of logical structure. Like pragmatism, poetic discourse focuses on the actual, the real, the situation. Ransom uses other terms and holds other ideas which correspond to pragmatism. He speaks of science as the "totalitarian state" and poetry as the "democratic state" (for its diversity of elements). He is no idealist, seeing good poetry as coming, not from the Romantic quest for the eternal, but from the poet's ability to describe the world of reality more completely than the scientist. Following his belief in the cognitive nature of poetry, he notes that "intellectual standards" should not be waived for poets. For Ransom, poets are thinkers who deal, in the form of poetic discourse, with ideas:

If a poet is a philosopher, explicitly or implicitly, treating matters of ethical or at least human importance--and it is likely that he is that--the discussion of his "ideology" may be critical in every sense in which one may be said to criticize systematic ideas. . . .⁵⁹

Here is a concern that is germinal in Bentley's aesthetic: that the author is making a statement through his vision of reality, though the statement is implicit in the material.

Indeed, the influence of Ransom on Bentley seems pervasive, especially where the importance of intellect in the literary work is concerned. Life proceeds in the manner of art rather than science; thus art is closely related to life and lived experience. "Fiction and drama, indeed, are explicit and systematic representations of the actual occupations we have in life," says Ransom.⁶⁰

F. R. Leavis

Bentley says that in the efforts of the New Criticism to teach a broad public about the importance and quality of literature, "no one has played a larger part than F. R. Leavis."⁶¹ Bentley's enthusiasm for Leavis runs deep. It is not only prompted by the desire to expand awareness and effect change, which corresponds closely to Bentley's pragmatism, but it is also guided by Leavis' close relationship to all of the critical ideas prominent in Bentley: concerns about literature and society, about meaning, realism, and the concrete in literature. Leavis stands out not so much as an influence on Bentley, but as a representative of the pragmatic way of thinking as applied to literary criticism. Leavis displays strong elements of liberalism, humanism, and empiricism, and it is easy to see how Bentley, working with back issues of Leavis' journal Scrutiny, would find Leavis an exemplary critic.

Scrutiny, begun by Leavis in 1932, was similar in many respects to Ransom's Kenyon Review for its interest in both art and political culture. Leavis announced his liberal humanism by stating the scope of ideas he found in the term 'modern affairs:'

. . . a play of the free intelligence upon the underlying issues. This is to desiderate a cultivated historical sense, a familiarity with the "anthropological" approach to contemporary civilization . . . and a catholic appreciation of the humane values. 62

The connections between art and society are, for Leavis, complex and interwoven in a manner Bentley appreciates. Literature is about man and society; it is concerned directly with lived experience. It may have both direct and indirect influence on society: direct through its value content and indirect through its application to society's awareness of culture in general. In turn, society has an effect on literature by defining the climate in which the artist produces. Bentley certainly subscribes to Leavis' statement of the general connections between art and society:

It goes without saying that for the majority neither the present drift of civilization nor the plight of the arts is a matter for much concern. It is true there are many who are interested in one or the other without seeing any connection between them; but it is only a small minority for whom the arts are something more than a luxury product, who believe, in fact, that they are the "storehouse of recorded values" and, in consequence, that there is a necessary relationship between the quality of the individual's response to art and his general fitness for a humane existence. 63

The specific connection between art and society comes through literature's direct concern for actual experience. This is mirrored in the critic by a corresponding concern for the art work as a direct experience, unmitigated by philosophical considerations. That art and criticism focus on actualities and experience gives shape to Leavis'

essential pragmatism. Thus Bentley calls him the "anti-philosophical" critic as a positive statement, for the generalities of philosophy may hamper the artist in his approach to direct experience and may dull the perception of the critic by ossification into rigid rules or dogma. In the case of the artist, Leavis' anti-philosophical stance calls for immediacy and actuality. In the case of the critic, it calls for relativism in aesthetic judgment, which shall be examined in the next section.

Bentley applauds Leavis' methodology which takes precedence over philosophy:

If there is a bed-rock of doctrine, an absolute, at the bottom of his work, it is not a philosophical system, but a doctrine as to procedure, a methodological absolute. . . . The assumption is that literature means something, that the meaning or content is bound up with the style or form, and may therefore be discovered by the trained sensibility. 64

This formulation contains the primary elements of Bentley's view of literature: the literary work has a meaning, inherent in the nature of language, and this meaning is closely tied to the form. Both cognitive and affective sides of man are combined in literature, and both are involved in the "sensibility," which he defines as "a discipline of the intellect and the feelings taken--as they must be taken in the arts--together."⁶⁵

Though Leavis is wary of philosophy, there is an aesthetics inherent in his methodology as he applies it in his work. The philosopher Rene Wellek, commenting on Leavis' Revaluations, which Bentley says "reappraised so many English poets that the book as a whole amounts to a new view of the English poetic tradition," calls that aesthetic realistic in its focus on social reality and the concrete and insensitivity to philosophical idealism in poetry.⁶⁶

Leavis, in a reply to Wellek about the position of philosophy vis à vis poetry, offers a statement of his theory, and it is clear that the theory grows out of the contextualist concern for the realization of vivid experience directly exhibited in the work:

. . . traditions, or prevailing conventions or habits, that tend to cut poetry in general off from direct vulgar living and the actual, or that make it difficult for the poet to bring into poetry his most serious interests as an adult living in his own time, have a devitalizing effect. 67

By this Leavis is not denying the importance of philosophical idealism to a poet; he is merely defining the arbitrary infusion of philosophy, often by a pre-conceived system of symbols, as outside the nature of poetry. This indicates an extensive realism along the lines of Bentley. Poetry may deal with philosophy, but only through the depiction of concrete experiences from "direct vulgar living." Poetry cannot be written to illustrate philosophy in any direct way. The poetic (or aesthetic) function of language is to offer concrete experiences from life which have "a directly evocative power." What the poet believes is not the major thing to be gotten from a poem. Hence a poet's symbols must speak through their concrete presence and not through a scheme.

Leavis' interest in actuality, adult experience, integration with a time and a society, and the unification of form and content corresponds neatly with Bentley's interest in the rational and intellectual as they appear in the real. Perhaps even more appealing to Bentley is Leavis' methodological approach and critical relativism. For Leavis, the critic makes contact with art works guided by mind and emotion, testing his reactions and looking for their source in a relationship between artistic form and the meaning he senses in the work. The

essentially pragmatic nature of this quest is appealing to Bentley, as is its unification of the intellect and the emotions in process.

I have traced Bentley's relationship to these critics at some length to show the various influences leading toward a realism which gives prominence to objectification and intellect, the cognitive in man, but not at the expense of the emotional. Bentley's pragmatism stands as the unifying factor, bringing intellect and emotion together both within the literary work and as components of the sensibility which confronts the work. That is to say that pragmatism acts as a reasonable barrier against extremism. Leavis' concern for the "play of the free intelligence" is prominent in Bentley both as an aesthetic method for criticism and as a general approach to life.

Bentley has made choices, and these are indicative of the empiricist pluralist, and progressivist nature of his pragmatism and socialism. He has chosen optimism over pessimism, engagement over withdrawal, relativism as a rational position between dogmatism and subjectivism, rationalism over irrationalism, democracy over authoritarianism, naturalism over idealism, growth over stasis, the Romantic world view over the Classic, relativistic belief over nihilism, and moderation over extremism. These are his positions, pragmatically worked out and presumably in flux. Belief may not always be continuous with criticism, especially in a relativist, but it generally shows a direction and offers counsel to the perceptions.

Bentley's realism is a result of his background and his interests, and it is easy to see how the two are related.

Bentley's Critical Philosophy: Relativism

We are now at a point where we may safely indicate the general features of Bentley's critical philosophy. Bentley says that "judgment is the summation of criticism. And some degree of objectivity is presumed by it."⁶⁸ This desire for objectivity, combined with an abhorance of dogmatism (or absolute objectivity) and an equally strong distaste for the anarchy and "sub-human chaos" of subjectivism, leads him (naturally) toward the pragmatist value theory of relativism.⁶⁹ Relativism seeks to bring order to the realm of judgment while remaining pluralist. Its roots in pragmatist humanism are central to its flexible methodology.

The major elements of relativism which relate to Bentley are these:

- 1) Value is man centered. Aesthetic value does not reside in an object, but in a relationship between that object and some subject in a perceptual situation.
- 2) Aesthetic value is neither absolutely objective nor subjective, but partakes of some qualities of each: subjective in that it recognizes the necessary primacy of the psychological experience (liking) in valuing, and objective in that it sees the valuing process as dependent upon rational reflection upon the situation and standards.
- 3) Relativist standards are not fixed and absolute, but flexible and tentative. They are empirical criteria derived inductively from concrete situations.
- 4) Though the intelligent critic must accept all standards which are sensibly and intelligently derived, he may reject those which are unintelligent: untrained, hasty, or ignorant.
- 5) The unification of both form and content in aesthetic judgment is desirable.
- 6) The development of aesthetic sensitivity through training, perhaps the purpose of criticism, is emphasized.

These precepts correspond closely to Bentley's general philosophical and aesthetic concerns. They also help systematize many of his statements about criticism. Bentley seems to be working toward a relativist stance, though this may be occasionally blurred by his argumentation, which may be seen as a pose for purposes of debate or as the necessary result of holding on to belief in certain ideas. In the following I will point out Bentley's relationship as it converges with or deviates from relativism.

1. That the value situation lies in a relationship between a work of art and a perceiving subject is inherent in the view that "literature means something." The semantic logic of meaning is that there must be a subject to interpret a sign, predicating a necessary relationship between the two. Theatrical presentation seems undeniably relational. Bentley has said that "The theatrical situation, reduced to a minimum, is that A impersonates B while C looks on."⁷⁰ The audience or perceiving subject completes the value situation.

That the subject-object relationship is full of variables marks the background to relativism's pluralism and anti-absolutism.

2. That there is a subjective ground to aesthetic value is clear in Bentley, who sees that the immediate object of criticism is a personally perceived sense of quality that precedes rationcination. "They were--it is the finest word in dramatic criticism--good; and the first sign of this goodness came, as it must in the theatre, in immediate pleasure."⁷¹ He suggests that this important psychological datum may be lost in the rational and thoughtful process of critical valuation: "Theatre is more of a directly sensuous pleasure than theatre criticism would suggest. . . ."⁷²

Bentley rejects complete subjectivity, of course, since such anarchic atomism would deny the importance of rational mind and render criticism meaningless.

. . . some degree or kind of objectivity is presumed by [judgment] For if all judgments are equally valid, there is just my predilection and yours and the other man's, and we are not in the human realm at all; we are in a sub-human chaos.⁷³

Thus he disapproves of critical impressionism, even that of a critic whom he likes and who has "superior taste and brains," George Jean Nathan. He criticizes Nathan's subjectivism, based on a belief that great art "should leave you gasping, not talking," because it ignores the rational or objective side of valuing.⁷⁴ This level of objectivism he finds in the critic's rational search for the qualities, inherent in the form of the work, which make it good. He calls this a "defining" process, where "'defining' means acknowledging the form of the work accepted."⁷⁵ Bentley is even more adamantly opposed to subjectivism based on ignorance and tastelessness, which shall be seen below.

3. Bentley's comments on "defining" help delineate both the character and process of objectivity in relativism: "the defining process . . . made him a critic in the fullest sense--one who judges by standards that are not imposed from without but prompted and checked by his own first-rate sensibility."⁷⁶ That is, objectivity is not brought to the aesthetic valuing process as a list of rigid rules, but is developed within the process of liking and defining. This is a rational and empirical process.

The need for flexibility in standards is a result of the changeable nature of experience. The dulling effect of rigid standards tends to cut

the critic off from experience and the perception of experience which are the crucial elements of aesthetic value. Bentley, perhaps influenced by Leavis' anti-philosophical criticism, recognizes the need for flexible standards:

Something a critic says that is "wildly inconsistent with his whole theory" may be an inspiration. The drama critic must dare to say the things that don't fit in if only because he is a reporter. He writes down what he in fact saw or what he in fact felt. For a dramatic critic the primary--I do not say the ultimate--experience is live contact with the actor.⁷⁸

To go to the theatre knowing exactly what a play ought to be, unwilling to envisage a redefinition, is sheer obscurantism.⁷⁸

This exemplary relativism does indicate that the inductive process of perceiving and thoughtfully considering art works is central to the development of standards. Among other things, it allows for freshness and novelty in art. Bentley seems willing to accept ideas from aesthetic views which are divergent from his own, as long as the central criterion of truth be met. Though he favors realism, he is not dogmatic about it:

I know that there is something to learn from the anti-realistic or "magical" school, and of itself it matters little whether, when you learn it, you turn against realism or simply broaden your definition to include the new lesson. If an anti-realist can be shown to be at grips with reality, and not to be lost in technical dexterity, rococo ornament, or intellectual blah, there is nothing to hold against him.⁷⁹

- 4) The problem of how to deal with conflicting critical claims, Bentley's concern in the above quote, is dealt with in relativism by accepting all standards which meet the criterion of intelligence. That is to say that in a pluralist world there will be various ways of looking at the features of art works, based on psychological and sociological differences among men, which will generate various art theories. As long as the tendencies and beliefs which ground the theories are made clear and shown to be reasonably and intelligently derived, a basic understanding

between individuals or groups holding differing theories may be reached. This understanding is in the nature of an agreement to disagree.

In the agreement to disagree, Bentley revels in the form of disagreement as a vitalizing factor in both criticism and art. It appears as a sub-species of his fondness for conflict and resolution. The important thing for critics is to have a point of view and to express it:

. . . a man cannot keep our interest from week to week unless, in addition to "writing well" and "being very bright," he seems to be "getting at" something, to have an end in view. Disapprove as much as you like of what he is getting at, provided you realize that he wouldn't have interested you in the first place, had he not been getting at it. Demonstrate to the world that his personal involvement has led him into this, that, and the other error, providing you grant that it also made him worth refuting. A critic not only has the right to the "ulterior motive," the arrière pensee, the "personal prejudice," he has to have them as a matter, so to say, of biological necessity. 80

A point of view which does not take account of sociological relativism, especially as applied to history, will not work. He criticizes Shaw for seeing all art through his own cultural perspective: "His limitation is that he does not trouble to understand the drama of earlier periods on its own terms."⁸¹ Art is related to a culture, to a time and a place, and the nature of that culture will affect the art. This is especially true, he says, for drama:

Even more directly than the other arts--or more crudely--the drama is a chronicle and brief abstract of the time, revealing not merely the surface but the whole material and spiritual structure of an epoch. Hence the necessity of historical criticism. 82

Bentley would of course be in agreement with the view that the critic of intelligence can definitively rule out unintelligent standards for drama. "The view that the average, untrained mind is the best judge in aesthetic matters cannot seriously and in good faith be defended," he says.⁸³ The commercialism which calls "good" that which pleases the

most people is an aesthetic based on ignorance. It is also a fully subjectivist aesthetic with no other criterion than liking, and when that liking is centered in the aesthetically imperceptive, the result is the elevation of bad art to a place of prominence.

If the critic is to base his judgments on popular opinion, he must be sure that the public is aesthetically aware. Thus Bentley finds fault in the 19th century French critic Francisque Sarcey who developed an excellent theory of drama but did not apply it well. The problem, says Bentley, came

from the single circumstance that Sarcey's analysis of modern culture was deficient. He quoted Molière's dictum: "there is no other rule of the theatre than that of pleasing the public" and failed to differentiate between Molière's public and Sardou's.⁸⁴

Hence there is good reason for the critic to understand society as well as aesthetics, and there is equally good reason to object to subjectivism as a sufficient condition for valuation.

5. There is another good reason--important in Bentley and explained by relativism--for the critic to have a valid analysis of society. That is the relationship of art to reality through content. The tendency of relativism, like that of pragmatism, is to avoid dualities, and therefore art theories which emphasize content to the exclusion of form or form to the exclusion of content are generally deprecated by relativists.⁸⁵

This, the link between art and life, is of the greatest importance to Bentley's realist aesthetic. As a relativist, his realism is yet another particular in the quest for a reasonable position between extremes, in this case, the extremes of formalism and moralism. By the time Bentley

wrote, the prevailing tastes had swung from nineteenth century moralism to twentieth century formalism (or simply 'modernism'), and thus much of his argument is against formalism: "The theatre critic's concern is theatre: playwright and actor, director, scene designer, musician. But since all these work together to interpret life, the critic's approach will not be merely formal."⁸⁶ Yet he also attacks moralism, which is a kind of dogmatism, when he sees it, for in a sense, both formalism and dogmatism remove the artist and the critic from a serious engagement with life. Formalism does so obviously by focus away from lived reality. Dogmatism rejects life by so limiting the view of reality that the result is not, in fact, real. The view of life which enters art should not be a dogmatic one, nor should the critic deal with it dogmatically; this is basic.

Since, however, value situations from life find themselves in art, critics should be allowed to react to them--react, that is, to content--as an aesthetic matter. Bentley implies that this is not done in some cases because of the honest and challenging nature of the artist's value search.

The editor of The Reporter was recently very shocked because his drama critic followed up an analysis of James Baldwin's Blues for Mister Charlie with some remarks of his own on the Negro Problem. How shocking to find either that the drama deals with life or that a drama critic is himself alive.⁸⁷

Good criticism, then, implies a capacity to deal with the social/moral content which is an integral part of the aesthetic, especially the dramatic, work.

6. Relativism's interest in intelligence, in standards, and in a relational sense of value seems to culminate in the view that aesthetic taste and appreciation can be developed and trained. This corresponds to Bentley's interest in the essential human qualities: potential for growth and development. Rather than design works of art to appeal to the "average, untrained" public, he would prefer to recognize those human potentials and teach people to appreciate better art. He quotes Wilde and Chekhov:

Art should never try to be popular. The public should try to make themselves artistic.

You must not lower Gogol to the people, but raise the level of the people to Gogol. 88

This desire may be seen as the function of criticism: to raise the level of aesthetic awareness. By doing so, the critic will also aid in raising the level of art, for as the public appreciates more intelligent and sophisticated art, the artist will be called on to produce it. This is the pedagogical function of criticism that Bentley admired in the New Critics. "The critic's influence is not directly on the creative act but on public opinion (the playwright being, however, a member of the public). What the critic influences is morale."⁸⁹

That the critic's function is that of a teacher or guide and that the criteria used by the critic focus on intelligence, takes us back to the thesis of Century so that we may clearly see a line connecting his thought. Bentley tends to overstate the position of the intellectual, but his function in society is clear:

If . . . there are those who champion the level of excellence it behooves them to stand as near that level as possible. . . . Talk of raising the masses is mere demagogy in the mouth of a man who does not claim . . . to be superior. Without prior existence of standards of excellence, without the prior existence of minority culture, no general development is possible. Without aristocracy, no democracy. 90

Pragmatic progressivism seems to inhabit Bentley's aesthetic, then, in two ways: It is part of the aesthetic function of the artist to guide by concrete value search, and it is the critic's central function to guide the public in aesthetic matters. As we have seen, the tendentious quality of criticism is related both to the aesthetic and to the critic's need to gain a hearing (see Section 4).

These are the major elements of Bentley's relativist aesthetic. They proceed naturally from his philosophical attitudes and his background in literary studies. Their specifics will be examined in the following chapters.

Notes

1. Maurice Mandelbaum, "Family Resemblances and Generalizations Concerning the Arts," in Melvin Rader, ed., A Modern Book of Esthetics (4th ed.; New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc., 1973), p. 530.

2. This will not be a technical discussion of William James or of pragmatism. Most of the ideas in this section and later can be found in, William James, Pragmatism (New York: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1908). Consider: "Pragmatism represents a perfectly familiar attitude in philosophy, the empiricist attitude. . . . A pragmatist turns his back resolutely and once and for all upon a lot of inveterate habits dear to professional philosophers. He turns away from abstraction and insufficiency, from verbal solutions, from bad a priori reasons, from fixed principles, closed systems, and pretended absolutes and origins. He turns towards concreteness and adequacy, towards facts, towards action and towards power. That means the empiricist temper regnant and the rationalist temper sincerely given up. It means the open air and possibilities of nature, as against dogma, artificiality, and the pretense of finality in truth."

At the same time it does not stand for any special results. It is a method only. . ." (p. 51).
Also: "We plunge forward into the field of fresh experience with the beliefs our ancestors and we have made already; these determine what we notice; what we notice determines what we do; what we do again determines what we experience; so from one thing to another, altho the stubborn fact remains that there is a sensible flux, what is true of it seems from first to last to be largely a matter of our own creation" (p. 255).
"On the pragmatist side we have only one edition of the universe, unfinished, growing in all sorts of places, especially in the places where thinking beings are at work" (p. 259).

3. This is, of course, the central feature of John Dewey's aesthetic.
4. Stephen C. Pepper, The Basis of Criticism in the Arts (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1946), p. 67.
5. Bentley interview.
6. Eric Bentley, The Cult of the Superman (London: Robert Hale Ltd., 1947), p. vii. (British edition of Century.)
7. Ibid., p. x.
8. Kenneth Burke, "Careers Without Careerism," Kenyon Review, VIII (Winter, 1945), 163.
9. Eric Bentley, Century, pp. 283-4.
10. Ibid., p. 28.
11. Ibid., pp. 24 and 219.
12. Ibid., p. 168.
13. Ibid., p. 71. There is an echo here of the patterning described by Maud Bodkin in Archetypal Patterns in Poetry (London: Oxford University Press, 1934), Ch. III. This book, as we shall see, had some influence on Bentley.
14. Bentley, Century, p. 71.
15. Eric Bentley, Bernard Shaw, pp. 56-58.
16. Eric Bentley, "Romanticism-A Re-Evaluation," Antioch Review IV, (Spring, 1944), 10.
17. Ibid.
18. Ibid., p. 19.
19. Ibid., p. 6.
20. Bentley, Century, p. 151.
21. Ibid., p. 201.
22. Ibid., p. 72.
23. Bentley, Commitment, p. viii.
24. Bentley, "Romanticism," p. 18.

25. George Novak, Pragmatism versus Marxism (New York: Pathfinder Press, 1975), p. 273.
26. Lucien Goldmann, "The Whole and the Parts," in Rader, Esthetics, pp. 423-4.
27. Bentley interview.
28. As defined by Stephen C. Pepper (op. cit., Ch. III) contextualism has its roots in pragmatism and is both ethically and aesthetically relativist in judgment.
29. Eric Bentley, ed., The Importance of Scrutiny (New York: Grove Press, Inc., 1948), p. xix.
30. Ibid., pp. xv - xvi.
31. T. S. Eliot, The Sacred Wood (New York: Barnes & Noble, Inc., 1928), p. vii. Bentley, it is safe to say, would go further into other things than Eliot, for example, author psychology.
32. Wilbur Scott, Five Approaches of Literary Criticism (New York: Collier Books, 1967), p. 179. Bentley, in the interview, denied the idea that the New Criticism was a unified movement: "There never was any thing called the New Criticism; it was simply a rather large group of critics who looked at poems without using much history."
33. Bentley, ed., Scrutiny, p. xiv.
34. Stanley Edgar Hyman, The Armed Vision (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1948), p. 3.
35. I am indebted to Dr. Corbin Carnell and his book Bright Shadow of Reality (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1974) for discussion of and insight into C. S. Lewis.
36. C. S. Lewis, Literary Essays, ed. by Walter Hooper (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969), p. xii.
37. C. S. Lewis, An Experiment in Criticism (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1961), pp. 27-8.
38. Walter Hooper, Introduction to C. S. Lewis, Literary Essays, p. xiii.
39. C. S. Lewis, "Psycho-Analysis and Literary Criticism," in Literary Essays, p. 296.
40. Ibid.
41. Bentley interview.
42. Bentley interview.

43. There is a discussion in Humphrey Carpenter's The Inklings (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1979) of the Oxford ambience of this period.
44. Bentley, ed., Scrutiny, p. xxiii.
45. T. S. Eliot, quoted in Scrutiny, p. xvi.
46. Ibid.
47. Bentley, "Romanticism," p. 13.
48. Eliot, The Sacred Wood, p. 100.
49. Quoted in Scrutiny, p. xv.
50. Bentley, Thinker, p. 273.
51. I. A. Richards, Principles of Literary Criticism (New York: Harcourt, Brace, & Company, Inc., 1926), p. 267.
52. Ibid., p. 273.
53. I. A. Richards, Science and Poetry (London: Kegan Paul, 1935), Excerpted in Elesio Vivas and Murray Krieger, The Problems of Aesthetics (New York: Reinert & Company, Incorporated, 1953), p. 585.
54. Eric Bentley, "The Early I. A. Richards, An Autopsy," Rocky Mountain Review, vii (Winter, 1944), p. 31.
55. Ibid.
56. John Crowe Ransom, The New Criticism (n.p.: New Directions, 1941), p. 28.
57. Ibid., p. 20
58. Ibid., p. 42.
59. Ibid., p. 302.
60. Ibid., p. 58.
61. Bentley, ed., Scrutiny, p. xxi.
62. F. R. Leavis, "Scrutiny: A Manifesto," in Scrutiny, p. 2.
63. Ibid., p. 3.
64. Bentley, ed. Scrutiny, p. xxii.
65. Ibid., p. xxi.
66. Ibid.

67. F. R. Leavis, "A Reply to René Wellek," Scrutiny, p. 34.
68. Bentley, ed., Scrutiny, p. xxiii.
69. I have extracted this view of aesthetic relativism from Bernard C. Heyl, primarily his book New Bearings in Esthetics and Art Criticism (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1952) and his article "Relativism Again," Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism, V (Spring, 1946) 54-61.
70. Bentley, Life, p. 150.
71. Bentley, What, p. 9.
72. Ibid., p. 134.
73. Bentley, ed., Scrutiny, p. xxiii.
74. Bentley, Thinker, p. 261.
75. Bentley, Search, p. 254.
76. Ibid., p. 252.
77. Bentley, Event, p. 19.
78. Bentley, Search, p. 34.
79. Ibid., p. x.
80. Bentley, What, p. 212.
81. Bentley, Bernard Shaw, p. 99.
82. Bentley, Thinker, p. 77.
83. Bentley, Search, p. 17.
84. Bentley, Thinker, p. 301.
85. Heyl argues this point based on the intensity and fullness of the aesthetic experience: "For example, it seems to me possible and desirable to urge that artistic theories which are concerned exclusively with either content or form advocate standards which are inadequate as bases for the finest artistic judgments. Empirical evidence demonstrates to my satisfaction that the richest artistic experiences involve an appreciation of both content and form and that, therefore, significance of content as well as perfection and significance of form is indispensable to the greatest art." New Bearings, pp. 141-2.
86. Bentley, Event, p. 16.

87. Eric Bentley, ed., The Storm Over The Deputy (New York: Grove Press, 1964), p. 9.
88. Bentley, Thinker, p. 249.
89. Bentley, What, p. 269.
90. Bentley, Thinker, p. 250.

CHAPTER II
BENTLEY'S THEORY OF DRAMA

In accordance with his philosophical leanings, Eric Bentley desires a play: 1) into which an artist has poured his mental, emotional, and spiritual efforts to form a truthful account of human experience; 2) in which that account achieves a well-formed representation of human value concretely portrayed; and 3) which will have a deep and moving effect on both the emotions and the intellect of an audience. These three areas--the process of artistic creation, the nature of art and the art work, and the experience of the art work--make up the general field of the study of art. In the case of the drama, there is an additional element--performance--which is traditionally considered as a secondary component of those arts in which it plays a major role in the presentation of the work.

Although Bentley is aware that the playwright writes for performance, and though he tends to unite the theatrical arts of performance and the written work of the dramatist in one word--"dramatic"--his theory is basically a sophisticated emendation of the traditional view, placing the playwright and the play as the central dramatic art (focus on the playscript and its qualities).¹ The presentational arts of acting, directing, and stagecraft, the theatrical arts, are to follow the primacy of the drama.

This chapter will examine in detail Bentley's theory of dramatic art. Some mention of performance will be pertinent to the section on Realism, but the bulk of the specific matters of theatrical presentation will be covered in Chapter III.

The categories used in this analysis, an expansion of the above three areas, have been adapted from those most commonly employed by contemporary authors in the field of aesthetics.² They represent the areas of inquiry deemed fruitful to a modern understanding of art. They may be expressed as a series of questions, as I use them, to which we have already broached some answers and about which we desire further knowledge. This outline shows their arrangement in the following.

- I. What is creativity? What motivates the artist? What is the artistic process?
- II. What is the nature of the work of art?
 - A. In what way is the art work imitation, in what way expression?
 - B. What is the nature of form in the work? How is it related to meaning?
 - C. What is the function of art? To please? To teach?
 - D. How does the question of belief enter the art work?
How do ideas and moral values become involved?
 - E. What is the nature of realism in art? How does Bentley relate the subject matter and the materials in dramatic and theatrical art?

- III. What is the nature of aesthetic experience? What does the spectator get from art? How does one look at a play?

Although the field of study of this chapter is divided into various areas and sub-areas, each one focusing on a particular facet of art and the artistic exchange, they are all based on Bentley's

essential view of the drama and all elaborate a number of ideas which are central and important to that view. There is, therefore, some necessary overlap in the following discussion. Intellect and mind, theme and ideas, expression, and purposiveness appear, for example, more than once. Realism appears in every section. Each idea is examined from various points of view to develop a full picture of Bentley's theory.

Creativity: The Nature of the Dramatist's Work

Bentley's view of creativity starts, as does much of his theory of the drama, with psychology.³ The dramatist is motivated by a desire or need to deal with his experience of reality by remaking and objectifying his vision in a formal structure called a play. In this he is guided by the force of culture and his society, though he will always be searching for new ways of seeing the world. Bentley separates the creative process of art from that of craft or pastime to explain that the quality of the former is one of direct struggle and exploration as opposed to the execution of a fully pre-conceived design. The artist is out to discover something, to go beyond the conventional view of the world, so he does not write to explain what he has already thought out. For this reason, the artist must remain, in some sense, pluralistic, for dogma will have a deadening effect on the search for value in concrete terms which is the artist's main work.

The psychology of the artist, the creative temperament, focuses on a desire to test reality, to continue a personal search for the essence of things beyond the point when most people adopt a conventional

outlook. Bentley suggests that the artist is not at ease with the world, that he suffers under an inquietude which compels him to examine the world, and this attitude of challenge is exactly what is disturbing (and therefore interesting) when it pervades the art work:

The artist, if not maladjusted, and I believe he is not, is not well adjusted either; perhaps we should follow Peter Viereck's suggestion and invent a third category, that of the unadjusted man, the healthy rebel. . . . Artists are disturbing, unsettling people, not by what they preach but by what they are, conservatives like Dante and Shakespeare being far more disturbing than our little revolutionaries. The greater the art, the greater the upset. 4

The artist focuses on reality through his experience of it. Personal experiences, secondary experience like the study of art and ideas, and the imaginative experience of fantasy combine as the raw material for the artist. Bentley specifies the need for something greater than just personal experience as a guide for the forming process of art: "In addition to memories, you need culture, all art being a crystallization of personal experience and second-hand experience." He defines culture in such a way as to show that the playwright is not a copier of older methods, but a creative artist, aware of the lessons of the past: culture "at its worst means: find out how it was done a hundred years ago and do it again, but at its best means: a sense of tradition."⁵

The complex psychology which impels the artist to deal with his experience is the subjective phase of creativity; its objective phase is the formulation of the drama. It is a process, first, of ordering and objectifying experience: "For the dramatist . . . to imitate an action is to find objective equivalents of a subjective experience.

An action is defined in terms of incidents and events of something undefined that lurks inside the dramatist.⁶ More than this, it is a process of refining and enhancing experience to achieve the quality of art, for it is not enough simply to repeat experience: "While the artist transforms fantasies into a higher reality, the journeyman playwright is doomed, like the neurotic himself, to live with them."⁷

For Bentley, Strindberg exemplifies the process of refining objectification in the relationship between art and experience.

Bentley notes that Strindberg's massive autobiographies are "the raw material for Strindberg's art works." Since his novels are "a rough attempt to impose form upon the chaos of his experience," and the plays are his "central achievement," it is clear that Bentley sees this progression as elaboration in the quality of art.⁸ Strindberg's work also serves as example of the insufficient objectification of subjective experience: his dream plays "carry symbolism well over the borderline of the public and intelligible into a private realm to which we need a biographer's passport."⁹

Bentley suggests that the playwright is indeed working with many of his own feelings, needs, repressions, and fantasies, and that only by clearly working through them to the point of the objective can they be made into raw material and, then, proper art. O'Neill's problem, for example, is not that he lacks the motivation of the true artist; O'Neill is involved in a search and an exploration of reality and experience. His difficulty is an inability to successfully work through personal material which is especially charged with feeling:

He is no Broadway playwright writing to entertain, to make money, or to be one of the boys. Nor is he a man of letters with an interest in the whole give-and-take of literary, political, or scientific discussion. He lives, as it were, in a trance, writing and rewriting the story of the two Jameses, Ella, and Eugene. Or parts of the story. Or the story at a remove. 10

It is Bentley's view of the play as a kind of communication--we have seen it in the "literature means something" attitude--which enforces a need for objectification, for making inner experiences "public." This same view grounds his desire that the playwright transform experience into a "higher" reality. This is the creative basis of the view that the dramatist has a content to express in a form. Bentley generally speaks in terms of the substance or content being communicated in a play "Eliot's 'conception' is clear, noble, and mature, his 'communication' uncertain, irregular, and incomplete. O'Neill's 'communication' is rapid, strong, almost overwhelming, his 'conception' is rude, simple-minded,gaga."¹¹

For purposes of critical discussion, one suspects, Bentley speaks as though the creative process might be one of dressing up already in-hand emotion and ideas, finding a form for preconceived content. Or, conversely, that the process is one of fitting content into nearby form. If art is a search, an exploration, then it is reasonable to expect the content and form to be discovered together, for the vitality of art lies in our sensing the quality of the search: "The pulse of the drama," says Bentley, "begins to beat at the moment the playwright begins to struggle with his experience."¹² The true art work is wrought by an organic process which unites planning and execution; what the artist struggles to discover are both form and content.¹³

Bentley is aware of many levels of problems in the pre-thought-out play. The commercial product play is pre-conceived, "is not a writer's exploration of reality but just a calculated arrangement of effects."¹⁴ Since it is well-crafted along traditionally conceived lines, it can attain a perfection which is unlike art itself: "The commercial play is the Swiss watch of dramaturgy. When properly manufactured, it is perfect, as only a piece of machinery can be perfect."¹⁵ Bentley suggests that while the commercial craftsman writes "with the audience consciously in mind," filling out a plan, the artist writes according to the dictates of his creative discovery, "in the faith that there will be an audience for good work."¹⁶ Instead of the divorce between art and craft which comes in the production of commercial pastime plays, Bentley prefers the unification of art and craft with the latter the servant of the former:

The artist has learned his craft, but is never content to be a craftsman. The craft serves the art or, as Goethe put it, one only writes out of personal necessity. The endings of plays, for example, are not a gamble on the audience's response. They are a matter of what the playwright feels to be necessary. 17

Bentley is not theoretically concerned that some would prefer "craft and pastime over art and exploration," but that there is a tendency in some to "confer a higher status on the lower phenomenon, raising craft above art, or so defining art that, to all intents and purposes, it is craft."¹⁸ The craft work, since it often achieves a high level of gloss, is easily mistaken by the unwary as a better product than the art work which tends to be rough and exhibit the vital qualities of exploration and struggle.

Since the work of craft can be pre-conceived, it will lack a subtle, intuitive quality necessary to art. Bentley calls this imagination: "Reality cannot simply be transferred from history to the stage. It has to go through the imagination of the playwright."¹⁹ Bentley does not define the imaginative process, but what he has in mind seems to be the kind of intuitive conceptual leaps which are common in art and are not the product of rational thinking. The craftsman, concerned with the effect of his work on the audience, will strive logically for the right effect; the artist will intuit connections in his work that could never be ratiocinated. The craft work is "reasonably figured out" while the art work is "imaginatively grasped."²⁰

Imagination may be linked with the term "spiritual curiosity" to define the elusive nature of exploration in the work of art. Spiritual curiosity seems to be a strong desire to know the essence of things, a part of the artistic temperament. Bentley introduces the term when he notes that the art/pastime dichotomy fails to explain the artistry in such "pastimes" as the farces of Labiche which he finds more artistic than the serious works of Dumas fils. He says that at this point the "critical terminology lets us down," and that, at any rate, he is trying to measure "the degree, not of earnestness, but of spiritual curiosity."²¹ Combined with an imaginative capacity for transferring experience into art, spiritual curiosity pervades the extremely brilliant pieces of Labiche--they are the highest expression of a form--more than the serious expositions of Dumas fils. Serious intentions alone do not make art, Bentley suggests, nor do non-serious

intentions necessarily preclude it. Spiritual curiosity suggests that it is not conscious intention that defines the achievement of the artist; it, like the capacity for imagination, is something which must be pre-existent in the artist.

Another quality which Bentley finds necessary for artistic exploration (it may also help explain the artistry of a Labiche) is audacity. Bentley calls this the "moral quality the artist . . . needs above all others." The explorer must be audacious, must have daring, must be something of a fanatic. For those artists who work "comfortably within their established resources," Bentley reserves "the harshest adjective in the critical vocabulary: innocuous."²² It takes a kind of creative curiosity aligned with an audacious spirit in order to bypass the ordinary and search for the new, the essential, and the extra-ordinary in life.

Curiosity and audacity, as traits in the artist, will lead to a vision of the world as, on some level, pluralistic, because everything will be questioned. The artist will avoid the pre-conception of ideas which is more a component of craft than art and acts as a limiting factor to the artistic search.

Such is the case with the modern "drama of ideas," which Bentley realizes must be a true discussion, a working-out in dramatic terms and not merely an explanation of a previously thought-out point of view. The didacticism of pre-digested thought lacks vitality:

Gerhart Hauptmann once remarked that the playwright must never re-word thoughts which he or his character has already thought: dramatic dialogue must only present thoughts in the process of being thought. Which is another way of saying that the playwright must not be directly didactic, for it is the didactic writer--out, not to learn, but to teach--who concentrates on finding effective form for thinking that was finished long ago. 23

This is to repeat that the playwright is not a relater of ideas but a discoverer of form, and the thought or content is a part of this form.

A common instance of the problem of already-thought-out ideas is the case of the artist who has fixed and certain ideas about the nature of the world, ideas which do not admit further struggle.

Bentley has identified this problem in the later work of Brecht:

He is one of those writers who search less and less after what I have been calling the human essence, because they are more and more convinced that they have already found it. . . . The only artists today who remain artists after conversion to causes which claim a monopoly of the truth are those who are not wholly convinced. 24

This is both a theoretical deduction and an empirical observation by Bentley who notes that Brecht's Communism was a vital artistic force while he lived in capitalist democracies, but was seemingly less so when he went to socialist Germany. Theoretically, it would indeed be difficult for absolute certitude to pervade the mind of an artist as here defined, especially if that absolutism were reinforced by a social/political surrounding. The artist, in complying with that surrounding would be making the same concession to an audience as that made by the entertainer, however much he believed that concession necessary and right.

Bentley suggests that the artist must retain the vision and nature of the Jamesian pluralist no matter what he believes. The artist's own beliefs and values--and those of the world around him--must be continually probed and tested in the light of experience. Otherwise, belief becomes dogma and constricts experimentation. As an example of how an artist may remain committed to a political belief and still function as an artist, Bentley offers the case of Shaw. Shaw, he notes, "realizes . . . that neither socialism, nor capitalism, nor feudalism, nor any other such 'ism' can be the basis of an art, even so social an art as comedy." The reduction of all conflict to good socialists against bad communists (or vice versa, depending on one's point of view) is too simplistic for the artist. Shaw saw that

the human comedy consisted too obviously of such facts as that socialists are not angels nor capitalists devils. And Shaw's interest as an artist has always been in the human situation as he found it and not simply as he desired it.²⁵

It is the abhorance of doctrine even in a revolutionary like Shaw which leads to Bentley's admiration of him as a pragmatist. An inability to accept the finality of the social and moral answers of the world's "isms" leaves the artist in a state of continual search and struggle and is helpful in explaining his sense of inquietude and his "unadjusted" nature.

What is the artist searching for? Bentley suggests that it is a particularly human truth: "The 'serious' modern playwright is, or should be, engaged . . . in the search for human essence."²⁶

Art and the Work of Art: Imitation and Expression

Bentley, in accordance with his tendency to unite disparate views, sees the drama as both imitative and expressive. His desire to maintain a view that art imitates reality is based on at least two factors. One is the undeniable connection he sees between drama and life. The second relates to his predisposition towards realism: imitative theories of art tend to support realism while expressive theories open the door to a much greater emphasis on non-realism (thus the predominance of expressive theories over imitative in the past two hundred years). Bentley of course sees much in art which is expressive, which is clearly central to his belief that the play has a content expressed in a form. Bentley unites imitation and expression by seeing imitation as the basic methodology of drama and expression as its central function or purpose.

Bentley sees the importance of the imitative nature of drama as related to the dramatic qualities of life itself and the desire of human beings to make life dramatic:

It is not just that life seems dramatic to us. We wish it to be dramatic; therefore, it is; this particular wish being insistent and imperious. Even our constant complaint that life is boring testifies to our refusal to be bored. We insist that every twenty-four hours be a drama in twenty-four acts. 27

Because life contains drama, Bentley concludes that Aristotle's concept of mimesis is correct, that regardless of the fact that "Greek scholars are always explaining that, for Aristotle, imitation does not mean imitation . . . it does." Where life itself is dramatic, the "sheer imitation" of life is not "unsound in principle." It is only because of the paucity of actual drama in life that sheer imitation has "possibilities [which] are extremely limited in practice." Imitation

lies, for Bentley, at the core of the drama, for all drama reflects back on very basic human impulses: "The flowers of dramatic art have their roots in crude action." This is the reason for his examination in Life of the lower or rougher forms of drama, of melodrama and farce, for they are closely linked to elemental psychology: "The art of the drama is firmly grounded in human nature, and to be human is to revel in mishaps and disasters."²⁸

It is the desire to find more drama in life that is the first suggestion that imitation cannot be strict or simple. Much of life proceeds on the dramatistic model, and so Bentley suggests that the drama is an extension and refinement of a process continuous with lived reality. According to his analysis, dreams, desire, fantasy--all manner of events from the interior and exterior lives of human beings--are infused with a desire for the dramatic. The propensity of the dramatist to focus on the unusual and the extreme in life is the result of imitation, the reflection of just those areas from which the most "dramatic" situations will proceed: "If the raw material of plot is events, particularly violent events, the raw material of character is people, especially what is regarded as their cruder impulses."²⁹

The drama may be inextricably bound to life, but distillation of art from raw material is a special kind of imitation. Drama offers a cohesion and an authenticity that is difficult to sustain in life, for in life there is seldom any protracted dramatic action, which is why in life we fall back on the fantasy, a kind of personal art form. The same applies to art: "Fantasy makes possible a continuity and

wholeness in both [play and novel] which actuality would preclude. Truth is stranger than fiction, for fiction makes sense in a way that truth does not."³⁰

Not only is drama more cohesive than life, it delivers up the kind of authentic encounters and meaningful events that real life seems designed to avoid:

This is the paradox of "drama and life": life is dramatic but its drama cannot be defined and presented without departures from life's usual procedures. In our usual "life as it is lived," inhibitions reign. Meetings do not often become encounters. Nor could they: it would be too inconvenient, too exhausting. Rather than encounter and face people all day, one needs devices for keeping them at arms' length. Courtesy, etiquette, mores, conventions are names for such devices. . . . Life on stage is not inhibited, it is acted out; which is one reason we can only stand a couple of hours of stage life at a time. 31

Since our desire to make life more dramatic is frustrated by social conventions, we turn to the imitative faculty to deal with our lives, or selves. If we break social convention on stage we may be dramatic. Similar behavior off stage may be considered neurotic or worse. There is a strong implication in Bentley's use of imitation that the imitation which is art is something more or better than life itself.

This is not to say that Bentley desires a drama which presents some ideal of life. Psychologically, we do want life to be dramatic, but Bentley differs from those who propose that drama should present idealized models for behavior--idealized often being a code word for dogmatically imposed moral conventions. Bentley is actually more strictly "imitative" than that, for he does not want to impose teaching from the outside but bring into dramatic focus the drama of life, of

the real. He wants to discover the ethical within the process. The proponents of a morally ideal theatre want to manipulate life to their own ends while Bentley wants to show the real life that is beneath the convention.

The changes made in "sheer imitation" are to highlight the real. What life offers in unusual instances and limited quantities, art and drama promise in abundance. The artist begins with life, but his sense of focus transports him beyond sheer imitation.³²

There is another sense in which imitation pervades Bentley's thinking, also bound up with psychology. Not only do we want to make life dramatic, we want to see things we know--not in the comfortable sense of common knowledge, but in the revelatory sense that all art eventually shows us the world and ourselves in it. This is the base from which Bentley explains the importance of myth in the arts:

The point of any myth is to provide a known element as a starting point and preserve us from the vacuum of absolute novelty. Art is a matter of satisfying certain expectations, and myth sets up expectations with a minimum of fuss. Art is also . . . a matter, not of cognition, but of re-recognition; it does not tell you anything you didn't know (the telephone directory can do that), it tells you something you "know" and makes you realize. ³³

This also explains the importance of type characters in drama, a form in which much ground must be covered in a short time. Types hasten our understanding, and the great dramatic types hasten our recognition and revelation. For though characters begin as apart from ourselves, the great dramatic characters become representatives of important forces in life. Some character types (*Hamlet*, *Othello*, *Alceste*) have become so relative to the large questions in life that they are termed archetypes.³⁴

Through this concept of re-cognition, Bentley is able to reconcile the concrete and individual with the universal. He unites Bergson's modern concept that "All art aims at what is individual" with Dr. Johnson's "Nothing can please many and please long but just representations of general nature" by a simple combination: "An artist's 'just representations of general nature' are, in each case, thoroughly individual."³⁵

This view of imitation contains a core of expression. Not the artist's self-expression per se, but the expression inherent in a personal vision of reality. Where imitation is guided by the hand of the artist and the human desire to make the material of life both dramatic and representational, there will be a necessary expression, even in the most objective of works. This is because imitation is a method, but it is not just copying, for it is imitation and more: the transformation of raw material (from life) into drama that has the explosive and revelatory quality of art.

The creative act is an expressive act, so that as the artist struggles with life to make a work of art, one may sense the vision which funds this labor. Bentley quotes Henry James to the point: "When vigorous writers have reached maturity, we are at liberty to gather from their works some expression of a total view of the world they have been so actively observing. This is the most interesting thing their works offer us."³⁶

Because art is expressive, it cannot attain the objectivity of science, but because it must include a communicable vision of reality, it cannot be wholly subjective either. There is a continuum between

scientific objectivity and complete subjectivity which includes elements of both and is the territory of art: "I mean that no work of art is wholly 'objective' or 'subjective.' It is a matter of emphasis," he says.³⁷

It is significant that Bentley does not see expression in terms of ideas or theme but in terms of vision, and that vision is expressed in terms of an overall feeling. The expression of the work is not a separate part of the whole, nor even a particular idea. It is integral with the structure, detail and style of the play. He explains Shaw's deviations from naturalism (which he admired) as the objectification of a feeling or sense about the world:

He [Shaw] must have intuitively understood something which, as a critic, he failed to grasp: that plot does not merely reproduce external reality. The violence and intrigue in Shakespeare, which Shaw the critic declared extraneous, provide the objective correlative of Shakespeare's feelings about life, and the "idiocies" of the plot of Man and Superman provide an objective correlative for Shaw's sense of modern life.³⁸

Bentley is aware of expressiveness as an important element in many levels of dramatic and theatrical art. In fact, the quality of expressiveness seems to define Bentley's sense of beauty. The function of art is to be expressive, and this function resides not only in the total art work, but in the various materials that go into the making of the work: language, the actor, the settings, and the like. The expressive is active and judgmental; it is forceful and evocative. Of Bert Lahr he writes that "his personality . . . expresses a criticism of life. . . ."³⁹ Likewise, he sees expressiveness in the comedy of Chaplin: "About any film of his, however slight, there is an air of menace. . . ."⁴⁰ Expression takes precedence over simple

attractiveness in the actor so that "the agile body is a truer archetype of theatre art than the beautiful one."⁴¹ In fact, the traditional sense of beauty often fails to explain, for Bentley, the expressive power of the non-beautiful: "I am almost ready to state that a great theatrical voice is always an ugly one."⁴² Bentley is clearly drawn toward the expressive as an especially potent example of the real, just as he prefers the imperfection of art to the perfection of craft: "Commercial art is as smooth, rounded, and unexceptional as an egg, while true art by contrast has something offensive about it, something imperfect and, possibly, maddening."⁴³

Although Bentley limits dramatic expression to the nature of its human materials and their realistic portrayal of human life (this is to be discussed in detail in the section on Realism), he recognizes the expression possible in other forms of theatre such as the puppet theatre, the musical, and the dance. He speaks of the "dignity of puppet art" as being fostered by the "ritual expressiveness of the few positions that are possible."⁴⁴ A dance number from a musical may have purely formal expression: "How the 'serious' theatre would come alive if anything ever happened there like that lovely moving pattern of limbs and umbrellas in fading light which is the dance in the rain from On Your Toes."⁴⁵ He sees in the dance the possibility of ritual expression, the formalism of the "ecstatic theatre" which is "concerned with life still unived, uninividuated, primordial, life unfiltered, still in the well spring."⁴⁶

No doubt Bentley's interest in Aristotle and the depth of his insight into the psychology of drama-in-life have led him to see much truth in the imitative quality of dramatic art. Imitation alone, however, does not explain the actual, full nature of art as Bentley sees it. The concept of expression is necessary to do this, and it is central to his thinking.

Form

Bentley is concerned about form both as the shape and structure of the drama and as the overall manner of the play's composition, or style. His basic view that the drama contains material from life which has been formed leads him to see the form and content dimensions of the play as united. Drama, indeed all art, must be well formed, but form should not be emphasized to the exclusion of content. He tends, however, to emphasize content over form, seeing form as the method by which content is revealed. Bentley offers insight into the sources of form as style, and though he demands that form not be imposed from the outside, he sees the modern realistic style as sufficiently broad to allow a great latitude of formal expression. He rejects two levels of formalism, both the conservative focus on form as an escape from true value search and the avant-gardist extremism which, in its search for new form and its focus on form, often leaves the content dimension unexplored. As the structure of the drama, Bentley sees form as basic to the art, for it is in the elaboration of the structural form (the plot) that he locates the primary source of the spectator's satisfaction.

The general function of form, for Bentley, is to give presence to an important content; the playwright's search is not merely formal. His statements that the artist must search for "the right theatrical form for the intentions of the play,"⁴⁷ and that "form must be left fluid so that a theme may be allowed to find whatever form suits it best" suggest the primacy of content.⁴⁸ Likewise, for the viewer of the play form should recede and content should be featured. Bentley is pleased when "form is so perfectly handled that it disappears, and we confront the content in its nudity."⁴⁹ Theme or content is the impulse which drives the form.

Bentley is aware that form as style is partly an historical matter, influenced not only by personal and aesthetic concerns but also by culture and environment:

Each time a work is written a proper form has to be found. Form is a fluid but not an arbitrary thing. It corresponds to the mind of the artist, which is in part molded by place and time. Although, therefore, an age may bring forth many forms, all of which represent its nature as well as the nature of the individual poet, there may well be one or two particular forms which are predominant. 50

Bentley offers the example of naturalism as an artistic movement which interacted profoundly with the beliefs and values of the late nineteenth century and, in addition, had the very positive effect of loosening the bounds of dramatic form of the period.

Naturalism, Bentley notes, did not receive its primary force from aesthetic theory, but from social concerns. When he says that "like all powerful literary movements, naturalism was not chiefly aesthetic but ethical," he implies that the values which the naturalists found in society were inherent in their aesthetic vision which was

expressed in a particular dramatic form (or, in their case, a particular abhorrence of form).⁵¹ Their ethical desire to depict the truth about society led them to throw down both the pompous sentimentality and the rigid form of the "well-made" play, to deny all artifice, and to preach the direct portrayal of life, both its lower-class squalor and its bourgeois hypocrisy.

The ethical force of naturalism's veracity had the effect of loosening the formal strictures of the "well-made" play in which a concept of form had become a rule, a method of judging drama by exterior and formal norms. This exterior formalism tended to ignore content: if a play had three tightly fitting acts with proper builds, climaxes, and resolutions, then it was a good play. Under the influence of naturalism's theoretical disregard for form, "the more gifted artists benefitted . . . in that they found to hand a more malleable medium [i.e., form] than their fathers had found." But they were not without form. Artists like Chekhov were influenced by naturalism to develop a subtly formed realism. Chekhov's tightly controlled form is confusing to the uninitiated, says Bentley, because perception of form tends to dwell on the obvious and "a new form always seems formless to the conservative mind."⁵²

Bentley supports the predominance of realistic form in the modern world on both aesthetic and historical grounds: 1) it is the form most likely to recede, least likely to obtrude on dramatic content; 2) it is a loose form, both broad and centrist, flexibly combining the ethical

force and anti-dogmatism of naturalism with the formal complexity of more traditional dramatic structure and experimenters like Brecht who developed a "new form of realism;" and 3) ours is a sophisticated and scientific age. In a complex world there will be many forms and much experimentation as artists explore formal expression and as new movements in art and philosophy excite new concepts in form to follow new ideas. Form will, however, tend to return to the broad realistic center since formal extremes, once done, often need not be done again: 'We often find that inventors of 'new' forms in modern literature carry a formula as far as it can go.'⁵³

Bentley's insistence that the drama have both form and content is the source of his criticism of both avant-garde and conservative/commercial formalism (which he often calls "theatricalism"). Any emphasis on style/form at the expense of content/life is negative for Bentley. And since content for him must be in terms of the specific concrete, formalist abstraction is a particular problem.

Bentley is not insensitive to the goals of the modern formalist search in the theatre which he recognizes as a "going back to the beginning, scraping back, as Stark Young once put it (he was a painter) to the design."⁵⁴ But he is concerned that such admirable search may leave the social and human element behind. Formalism tends to abstract human concerns, even when the search is serious. Bentley criticizes the expressionists and O'Neill for attempting "to seize life in its essence but without its content."⁵⁵ The formalist tries to get at the essentials directly, while Bentley looks for the essentials through

particulars. When the search is not serious, as in conservative formalism, emphasis on form becomes an excuse for no significant search at all, as in the "well-made" plays of Sardou, the Baroque of Nazi Germany, and in Russian socialist realism.

The form/content relationship must contain a vital content; otherwise there is little to support the form. This notion is combined with the idea that form must follow the nature of the content, and the two help Bentley deal with various specific aesthetic problems. For example, when an author has much to express and cannot find a valid artistic form, the expression is vitiated: "At the present, Sartre's only notion of an instrument to enforce his ideas is melodramatic cliche."⁵⁶ This is content with bad form. There is also the problem of a once-valid form from which the content or vitality has gone. This may be seen in old art forms which are kept alive from the outside. Bentley speaks of a Chinese theatre which is "still interesting as a relic, as an unfamiliar form from which we can learn something, but lacking in substance, an empty shell."⁵⁷ A similar problem exists with copy productions: "The details were so definite that one had the impression the play was already embalmed and being preserved for posterity."⁵⁸

Perhaps the most essential form/content problem concerns the presence of ideas or meaning in a play which Bentley says should not be injected from the outside but should grow as a part of the form, must be organic to the structure. It is common on Broadway, Bentley notes, to attempt to give stature to a commercial play by such injection: "The formula for serious drama is: non-serious drama plus a small dose of 'modern ideas'...⁵⁹

Form, in addition to being the overall style, is also the spine of the drama. It is the arrangement of the plot and more, for the patterns of the play are complex and exist on many levels. The dramatist works on the form of the play in order to affect the audience, and, as usual, Bentley emphasizes the rational, formed background to the sensation of the emotional elements of the play: "In a play no twinge can be inflicted on an audience which is not a part of an intelligent, intelligible pattern and has meaning as such."⁶⁰ In this way, Bentley relates the primary effect of the play to pattern or form, and thus it is the importance of form which influences both Bentley's and Aristotle's emphasis on plot.

Form at this level is not merely the sequence of events in the play, but can be seen as the central achievement of the playwright and his major purpose. It is the building of a pattern which will draw an audience into the events, and in this matter Bentley's view is much like that of Kenneth Burke who relates form to "the psychology of the audience." For Burke, "form is the creation of an appetite in the mind of the audience and the satisfying of that appetite."⁶¹ This is quite similar to Bentley's definition of suspense: "Not merely ignorance as to what will happen next, but an active desire to know it, a desire that has been aroused by a previous stimulus."⁶² At its most sophisticated--in artistic works--Bentley describes how audience psychology is not hinged so much on "information for the head as reassurance for the heart."⁶³ The conclusions of great plays, those which do not depend for their enjoyment on knowing the ending, are generally known in advance.

We do not want to "find out" the ending, but by formal complication, see it come about. Burke deals explicitly with this: 'We cannot take recurrent pleasure in the new (in information) but we can in the natural (in form).'⁶⁴ He calls the use of form "eloquence" and says it is "the end of art, and thus its essence."⁶⁵ Bentley tends to agree that formal excellence is the essence of the aesthetic, though perhaps not the end of art.

The Function of Art

Bentley deals characteristically with the classical dualism which lies at the center of discussion about the purpose of art.⁶⁶ Rather than belabor the question of whether art's function is to teach or to please, he hastens to accept both and finds ways to unite them. He concludes that "to teach" is an important and central function of art, and, in addition, he demands pleasure as a part of the aesthetic experience. At the extremes of the dualism he does not deny the need for some simple pastime or some hard propaganda; he merely opposes making these extreme stances the central concept for a theory of the drama. By taking a position in favor of some level of didacticism in drama, of some rational/intellectual content, Bentley goes against both the dogmatism of the commercial theatre, founded on the base concept of the public as dull and without any higher wish than a moment's distraction, and the dogmatism of blatant propaganda which considers the public witless and unable to weigh an issue. In this we see a pragmatic humanism which desires a positive effect from drama upon people.

Bentley's theory, in short, is that the drama uses pleasure to accomplish a kind of teaching-through-experience which may itself be highly pleasurable. For Bentley, pleasure is not a simply defined word. Likewise, he views society as complex and fragmented. It is the fragmented quality of the modern social order, exacerbated by the pressures of commercialism, which is the foundation of Bentley's interest in a drama in which points of view--ideas--are discussed openly. This discussion, in the form of conflict, is the foundation of Bentley's desire for purposiveness and his leaning towards the teaching function of art.

Bentley states a very general purpose for art, based on its relation to society and, particularly, his analysis of society's needs:

Bringing things alive would, I think be widely recognized today as the purpose of the arts in general, a purpose doubly worthy and urgent in a civilization like ours which is actually less a civilization than a massive assault on all forms of vitality, not to mention life itself. 67

This purpose is at variance with the direction of modern society to cheapen not only the arts but much else besides by making "entertainment" the model for much human activity. Here, "entertainment" means, not just pastime, but "a pleasing titillation of the senses and of that small part of the brain which the simplest jokes call into play. Entertainment is an infinitely complex industry devoted to the evocation of the crudest responses."⁶⁸ Such entertainment, along with the crude propaganda of salesmanship which accompanies it, has a deadening effect rather than a livening one in that it fosters cheapness, simple mindedness, thoughtlessness, and insensitivity. It is therefore anti-human,

whereas art is about "teaching the human heart it can exist again, that it can be brought back to life."⁶⁹ The end of art is to teach this in a general way; it is a Romantic purpose. It is not directly didactic.

In a sense, however, it is didactic, which puts it in the mainstream of Western art theory. Bentley notes that "in the course of Western history, the didactic view of art has predominated."⁷⁰ He mentions ironically that "it was not Karl Marx but Samuel Johnson who said: 'It is always a writer's duty to make the world better.'"⁷¹ But since Aristotle posited "pleasure" as the purpose of poetry, Bentley is careful to quote both Aristotle and S. H. Butcher to show that Aristotle's concept of pleasure was neither simple nor simple-minded: pleasure includes an active phase, a learning phase, and learning is the highest form of pleasure.⁷²

Bentley relates the force of purposiveness in modern drama not to any change in the nature or purpose of art, but to changes in society which have the effect of bringing out certain directions in art. Against Brecht's most didactic theorizing ("The main thing is to teach the spectator to reach a verdict") Bentley places Longinus' ancient dictum, "the effect of genius is not to persuade or convince the audience, but rather to transport them out of themselves." In this manner he gives credence to both views, the didactic and the sublime, for he is aware that "the modern drama . . . has been much more inclined to persuade and convince than was premodern drama, nor am I one of those who regret it."⁷³

Modern, fragmented society needs an art which will have an active and positive effect, a didactic effect; in some sense, art will help establish balance and direction in society, perhaps through the identification of values.

There is some radicalism--but not a great deal--in Bentley's unification of Brecht and Longinus, of didacticism and intense pleasure, of intellect and emotion. In his view, the unification of pleasure and learning opposes a widely-held notion that learning must be separate from lived experience. This is based on a dichotomy--that between thought and feeling--which Bentley denies. The dualism implies that "art is emotional, while learning is intellectual."⁷⁴ Bentley argues that not only is much emotion involved in the learning process, but that even painful emotion ("to learn from painful experience") is closer to pleasure than to no feeling at all. His point about learning and pleasure is amply supported by educational theory, and we need go no further than Aristotle's theory of the purpose of tragedy to find a view of art in which emotional balance, perhaps even emotional entrainment, is brought about by the aesthetic experience of pain. It follows that some kind of pleasure is presumed by all art, not merely as its purpose, but as a psychological prerequisite for attention. As Bentley says, "that one should pay attention without pleasure, in art, is never intended. . . ."⁷⁵

The broad view that the function of art is to return man to his humanity is active and purposive. It means that the playwright cannot simply give the audience what they want to hear, that which will make them complaisant. Bentley opposes the theory that the play

"mirrors the picture people have of themselves," and that "writing verse is almost like taking the blood pressure of the age."⁷⁶ According to Bentley, realism, like Hamlet's "holding the mirror up to nature," does not show men as they want to be or want to be seen, but as they actually are. It is a normative mirror, and its purpose is to expose the truth. As the artist has become the conscience of society, he may also offer to the eyes models which are intended to shock or jolt us out of complacency, to reintroduce interaction between individuals and values. This is what Bentley has in mind when he says, "I should like to oppose to this idea of a poet who merely takes the blood pressure of the age the idea of a poet who raises the blood pressure of the age." Such a poet would find an audience because of the active pleasure to be had from his works:

Where is there more fun--in a comfortable play that gives auntie back her picture of auntie or an uncomfortable play which, while it may annoy auntie a bit, also intrigues her, tickles her, interests her, livens her up, and perhaps even shakes and moves her? ⁷⁷

We must add that "auntie" would have to be open, curious, and willing to undergo this kind of artistic experience--but these are merely the attitudes necessary for any learning experience.

Broadly speaking, then, Bentley's didacticism posits a social function for art. The artist and the art work tend to stand in confrontation with society's tendency to relax into doctrinaire ways. To overcome the humdrum and the meaningless, the artist must deal with the individual and social issues of the time, knowing that these are not necessarily limited to one age, but may be relative to many. Art promotes an awareness on the part of the spectator which is necessary in a true society. Rudolf Arnheim describes it clearly: "One aspect

of the wisdom that belongs to a genuine culture is the constant awareness of the symbolic meaning expressed in concrete happening, the sensing of the universal in the particular."⁷⁸ Bentley's purpose is to have people see this function in art, to understand the implications and insights of art works. Art has the function of letting us look at ourselves and the world really.

Considering this extensive didacticism, one would expect Bentley to find favor with the politically or socially engaged artist but not with the un-engaged aesthete. Although this is generally true, Bentley, in the essay "The Theatre of Commitment," shows how the aesthete may be seen as engaged. He does this by focusing not only on his works but also on the social situation in which the works were produced, and in this way he is able to re-define alienation as engagement. In the proper political context, the follower of ars gratia artis may be, if not committed, then one step away from it. He gives the example of Pasternak's aestheticism as virtual commitment in the face of Stalin. He offers Oscar Wilde, who said art was "perfectly useless" because "he didn't want art reduced to the role of little moralistic mottos. . . ." Wilde's rejection of art's utility raised art to the highest place in life, and Wilde "was the most committed of men. He not only preached anarchistic socialism, his parading of the aesthetic way of life was his form of direct action." Bentley uses this extensive sociological view to show that his general concept of didacticism is valid for all art, for he concludes that "all serious authors" are committed.⁷⁹

As a sub-heading to his overall didacticism, Bentley is interested in the direct relationship between politics and art. When he uses the term *Commitment*, capitalized, he means politically committed, where the artist's "political views enter into his art." Political commitment in art seems to be a more forceful form of art as Bentley usually sees it, for it is directly critical: "Relative to the general social situation, the literature of *Commitment* is radical. It is a literature of protest, not approval, of outrage, not tribute." *Commitment* is the result of an extreme situation in which the artist finds it necessary to mix social action and art directly, such as when the art is in danger of being made a servant to dogma (Bentley gives the example of classicism in Hitler's Germany).⁸⁰

Because the Committed artist is still basically an artist, Bentley does not belittle the propaganda in Brecht's plays by saying, as many do, that Brecht is an artist only "in spite of" the propaganda. Bentley is aware that Brecht's polemics and his broader vision often set up a tension, but he prefers not to see the propaganda as conscious and the vision as unconscious. How, he asks, can an intellectual playwright be admired only for his unconscious production? He would rather see Brecht as a shrewd artist with an all-encompassing vision, a serious Marxist, yet, like Shaw, keenly aware of the ironies and contradictions of life. Brecht was able to remain committed without losing sight of the art of drama. Certainly what the author has on his mind may be a valid element in a play when it is rendered concretely, in the manner of art rather than in the manner of polemic.⁸¹

But Bentley concludes that there may be a time for polemic. Extreme social turmoil may bring about a situation in which the artist "may be called upon to drop the pen and take up, if not the sword, then whatever is the most effective implement of direct action. The years 1942-45 were such times, if such times ever were." And there are times when it is not more, but less violence which is called for--precisely the situation in 1966 when this essay was written:

One could say the need was for civilization, just that. One could say: education. But there is an urgency which neither word suggests, and therefore one must end with it and say: there is a need for propaganda. 82

Civilization, education, propaganda--this is a continuum of increasing specificity. I doubt Bentley is reversing his former criticism of the non-artistic nature of propaganda; he is perhaps accepting propaganda as part of the materials of the artist. The expression of outrage at a political situation can be effectively dramatic, as in Hochhuth's The Deputy or in Picasso's more completely realized Guernica. Bentley says that The Deputy is a success because "the purpose of this kind of play is to communicate a sense of outrage. And it has communicated a sense of outrage."⁸³ That is, Hochhuth's play may be seen as an exploration of a situation fused with an emotion, not out to teach, but to arouse. Certainly the play effectively propagandized only those previously inclined to its thesis.

Although this judgment seems extra-aesthetic, it may also be defended on grounds suggested above. In the manner of a good pragmatist and relativist, Bentley has seen fit to re-examine a situation and expand

his aesthetic. He is accommodating a dramatic experience in which he senses quality. This is not a repudiation of aesthetic criteria, but a redefinition. He is not calling art propaganda or vice versa. He is exploring the conditions of art within the framework of a purposive aesthetic, searching for works and situations which interact in some aesthetic way with political belief and a sensed need for action. If the artist expresses, then nothing seems to limit the material of his expression. That material may include, for example, a reaction to the outrageous in life.

The artist's outrage at a particular social situation is the closest Bentley comes to admitting a strong element of direct personal expression into the art work, and this is allowable only under the general condition that the artist render his expression in dramatic terms. How this is done is the focus of the next section.

Ideas in Art: How the Playwright Thinks

Bentley does not think the drama is exclusively any one thing--certainly not, of themselves, ideas and the intellect from which they proceed.⁸⁴ Yet he defends the proposition that intellect and ideas are a valid part of the drama. As he erases the please/teach dualism, so he erases the intellect/emotion dualism and denies the polarity of the view that drama must either "make statements or give great experiences." Drama flows from the whole man, and like "all art draws on both the intellect and the feelings, and presupposes that the two work, not at loggerheads, but in harness."⁸⁵

Ideas, which are endemic to language, are unavoidable in the drama. In addition, all emotion and ideas in drama proceed from ordered, intelligible patterns. The coherence of structure necessary for the transmission of vivid experiences suggests a forming mind--and a receiving mind capable of processing the artistic structure. Plays, though full of emotion, do not transmit emotion in directly emotional terms. The unique emotion which comes from a particular play is the result of unique experiences presented by the play in concrete terms and a meaningful, intelligible pattern which must be processed by the mind. In this way, all drama contains intellectual elements, even if every play does not contain the specifically featured content of ideas that may appear in a play by Shaw or Pirandello.

There are, then, two levels of thought which may appear in a play: 1) the forming process that emanates from the complexities of mind and both reflects and expresses them and 2) the content dimension of the art work which may have thought as a part of its subject matter, may focus on thought as an important aspect of the human being to be expressed in the drama. The former is an aspect of all drama--all art--and may be seen as embodying the greater purpose of drama, the transmission of "wisdom," or as Bentley prefers, "*Lebensweisheit*."⁸⁶ The latter corresponds to the ideas in the "drama of ideas" as presented in modern sociologically and philosophically oriented drama.

No element of thought or idea in a drama can be the result of the mere translation of ideas into a play, a fact which may be deduced from Bentley's distinction between craft and art. Thought enters the

play as the playwright struggles with the material of the drama. The playwright "thinks" with plot, character, action, dialogue, and the like, rather than directly in philosophical ideas. The play is not a rhetorical message, a thesis to be proven, a moral tale, or anything other than a work of art.

The abstract quality of philosophy is contrary to the concrete depiction of life which the play needs, and Bentley deplores this abstraction in the writing of DeMotherlant and Sartre:

In the plays of both authors there are too many "key speeches," speeches after which one can say "Oho, so that's what the play's about," speeches which would not be necessary if the drama had been concentrated in the action and the characters. 87

The art of the drama consists, that is, in creating valid and intense actions and characters that ring true. Ideas cannot be grafted on or stuck into a play--they come out of the other elements and are embodied in the form and matter of the play. Bentley decries the tendency not to do the real work of the dramatist: "You imagine that all you need to do is refer to 'schizophrenia' and you are exempt from the onerous duty of creating a schizoid character. You imagine that all you need to do is refer to religion many, many times and you have dramatized faith."⁸⁸

Since Bentley's method as a critic is often to look for the theme or content in a play and then to discuss its embodiment in the dramatic elements of character and structure, he points out the pitfalls in imposing a theme in a play: in bending material to make a point, the playwright may destroy the integrity of the drama. Making a statement is not as important as dramatic development. Bentley shows the problem of the mechanical forcing of theme in the case of the playwright who

must make his play indicate a particular theme but can do so only at the cost of oversimplifying his characters to make them fit a pre-determined mold, to the extent that character "becomes a dull thing and of no imaginative interest." This oversimplification results in melodrama, and "bad melodrama [that in which "the moral is too earnestly insisted"] does not cease to be bad when you call it Socialist Realism."⁸⁹

Where thought and ideas are to be a focus of the content, the playwright must take care. He should not set out to prove an idea or thesis in a play since the ideas that are in "drama of ideas" must be dealt with in terms of conflict, and the process of proving may cause the dramatist to cheat: "To prove a thesis in a play is no better than cheating: all the playwright has to do is stack the cards. And to concentrate on a purpose of this kind is to exclude all the traditional and mandatory substance of a play."⁹⁰ Bentley cautions that in the process of dealing with ideas one must remember that they are a part of a work of art which has its own, non-discursive, methodology.

As opposed to the pitfalls in attempting to get ideas into drama, Bentley describes the two basic methods (corresponding to the two levels of thought) by which intellect enters the drama. The first is common in dramatists from Sophocles and Shakespeare to the present, who do not focus on ideas, but rather deal poetically with nature. These dramatists often write within a secure and unified world view. They are not like the rhetorician who writes to put existing thoughts into better expression, to take ideas and give them the best possible form. The poet/dramatists want "to get at a thought before it is fully thought," so that "the word-finding and thought-thinking proceed together." Thought

and form are bound together in the original dramatist, and the thought inheres to choice of words, building of actions, and creation of characters. Bentley offers, as he often does, Shakespeare as the pinnacle of this kind of dramatist, noting that even the philosophical borrowings in his plays seem new because they are so experienced. "This is one reason why Shakespeare means more to us than those who would teach us more. He takes us back to a point before that at which 'teachings' are formulated."⁹¹ Shakespeare "thinks" in the form of drama and poetry. His language and action are vivid and lead to vivid experience; but they are also shot through with vivid ideas.

The second method for dealing with ideas in drama is to make them the principal focus of the play, as in the modern "drama of ideas." Bentley says that whereas Molière may be seen to "use ideas but not make his drama out of them," in the drama of ideas "the ideas are questioned and it is by the questioning . . . that the ideas become dramatic, for never is there drama without conflict." Bentley posits a sociological reason for the predominance of idea conflict in modern drama in that a conflict of ideas "might be particularly appropriate to a world without a common faith, philosophy, or idea."⁹²

In this world where there are no fixed beliefs, no arguments from authority, and no cohesive community to which the drama may appeal, the drama of ideas will be important and useful. It offers the playwright an arena in which he may work out the truth of ideas concretely through character, dialogue, and action, using the dramatic method of

conflict and resolution or dialectic. The playwright may, in the finest works, forge new values. Bentley takes ideas to mean ethical ideas and he, like Shaw, is interested in "Ibsenism" because "morality was in Ibsen something to be discussed and worked out, not something given. Morality is not only to do right but to discover what is right. . . ."⁹³ The methodology of the drama of ideas is close to that of pragmatism, and both presume a pluralistic world. For this reason Bentley says that both Ibsen and Shaw use a "flexible pragmatism close to that of William James."⁹⁴

Bentley identifies two kinds of discussion of ideas in the drama, both evident in the work of Shaw. First is "the discussion of problems for their inherent interest" (as in "Don Juan in Hell"). Second and more common to the stage is "discussion as an emanation of conflict between persons."⁹⁵ In both types of discussion of ideas, the thought content is embedded in character and situation if the play is good. In both, ideas are being worked out, as in life, rather than merely paraded before an audience. Bentley thinks Shaw used both methods superbly for, given Shaw's philosophy, the outcomes are never obvious. For this reason Bentley defends Shaw against those who find him non-dramatic, all "ideas," by pointing out how Shaw is able to sympathize with both sides, "not as a matter of fairmindedness . . . [but as] a matter of a particular mentality, a particular way of observing life. Shaw's way is the dramatist's way. For him, ideas perform like characters."⁹⁶ Shaw concretizes, and is therefore a genuine dramatist.

Bentley sees the play as having valid elements of thought in terms of ideas and statements that emanate directly from the action and the characters, and in addition a greater thought which is the wisdom of the playwright: "Thought, defined as an aspect of a play, is only an aspect of a play, but . . . there is a broader definition of the term according to which it might truly stand as the aim and object of playwriting." Bentley feels that this greater sense of thought was described well by Hebbel when he said that "in drama no character should ever utter a thought; from the thought in a play come the speeches of all the characters."⁹⁷

The experience of the play as a play, then, comes first in Bentley's theory, but it is not an empty sensation: "Drama has to do both with conveying an experience and with telling truths about it." Meaning, along with the didacticism implied by it, is close to Bentley's ultimate interest in and purpose for art, and is what leads him to rate art so highly as a human endeavor in a fragmented world: "All art serves as a lifeboat to rescue us from the ocean of meaninglessness--an extraordinary service to perform at any time and more than ever today when religion and philosophy prove less and less able to perform it."⁹⁸

Realism

Bentley has expounded a cogent view of realism based, as we have seen, on a particular view of society and the world. Many features of Bentley's realism have previously been discussed in a piecemeal fashion; here they will be examined more coherently as his support for

realism as the primary dramatic style and for his explication of the nature of realism as both style and substance. Bentley's defense of realism as the "right" form for modern drama begins with his sense of the profound connection between drama and life. But since realism for him does not mean an exact copy of life but in art is dependent on a formed quality guided by artistic vision, realism must be a broad style focusing on a single substance: human essence. Because of realism's breadth, Bentley recognizes the necessary presence of non-realistic elements in realistic works. At the center of the realistic drama Bentley finds a dialectic of forces which impel dramatic action, forces which are presented in concrete human terms but are representative of values. Bentley also separates drama from the other arts to extend his support of realism, suggesting that dramatic art is uniquely concerned with man, especially as it is performed by living persons. The return of man to himself in his own, living image defines Bentley's essential realism.

The extensive presence of the dramatic in daily life emerges for Bentley as the ultimate connecting point between life and the drama. This link is more profound and less obvious than the surface similarity between the events in life and those in plays. There is an essential and deeply ingrained dramatism in life, a process of role playing whereby men make up, define, and then continually emend and redefine their vision of themselves and others; it is man's way of knowing himself and the world of others.⁹⁹ Pirandello, says Bentley, is aware of this process when he suggests that men create reality by the roles they play, the ultimate question being "What is real?" Bentley notes

the bewildering complexity of this process as it is described in "Pirandello's view of life: we men can only play roles, we cannot just be. . . . For us, then, the enactment, not the thing acted, remains the ultimate term. . . . Pretense is the ultimate reality."¹⁰⁰ A drama-like process is itself the reality, and drama is the art which presents the form of this process.

This view of reality, at least at the level of human relations, is born out by both psychological and sociological researchers. Freud, who seems to be its modern scientific discoverer, spawned Jacob Moreno's psychodramas which Bentley calls "the most vivid evidence imaginable of the intimate link between theatre and life."¹⁰¹ Bentley draws conclusive evidence for the existence of this link from his realization that the essential subject matter of drama, the transformations, substitutions, and realignments of the primal family scene, is presented directly from life in psychodrama, less directly (mediated by art) in drama proper. The stuff of psychodrama is the raw material of drama.

By this view, drama shares an undeniable essence with life, but except in the plays of certain dramatists like Pirandello, drama does not focus on the more perplexing aspects and Freudian depths of the chaotic miasma of interpersonal relations. In fact, drama tends to overcome the tenuous nature of existence by giving form and stability to the welter of impressions from life. This is the nature of art:

There is art only if the material of life is selected and intelligently arranged. Such arrangement is of course artificial. It imposes form on the formless. And the understanding of art depends upon a prior understanding of this fact. Nothing, therefore, that we take for reality can we also take for art.¹⁰²

Thus, drama is both intimately linked and, to some extent, removed from life with the purpose, we have seen, of showing the truth about the central issues, forces, meanings, and drives, in short, the essence of life. For this reason Bentley finds unsatisfactory all attempts at slice-of-life naturalism and the transmission to the stage of the dreary neurasthenics of life. Bentley's realism posits an intimate link between drama and life, but the two are not to be identical. For him, the naive realistic standard, "it was just like life," is at least insufficient.

The extent to which artistic form is removed from life is flexible in Bentley, and therefore there is no one substance which may definitively be called realism. He defines realism "roughly and tentatively" as "the candid presentation of the natural world," and then goes on, as he must, to expand and explain the term. Like Erich Auerbach, he finds few limits to realism when there is an "attempt to be closer to the actual texture of daily living."¹⁰³ Thus, stream-of-consciousness and other modern strategies may be seen as a development of realism.

Bentley cannot conclusively define a list of terms which apply to realism. He even suggests that his own dichotomy between "realistic" and "anti-realistic" art is a construction that does not exist in reality. This is his list of the opposing nature of real and anti-real style, as well as his comments:

slice of life vs. convention
naturalism vs. fantasy
social vs. individual
political vs. religious
propagandist vs. aesthetic
prosaic vs. poetic
objective vs. subjective

It follows from my remarks about critical terms and the term realism in particular, that a writer may well be in the right-hand column in some respects and in the left-hand column in others. Nor are the pairs mutually exclusive. 104

In fact, it is the presence of "non-realism" in some way within "realism" which defines the nature of the artistic vision; i. e., the style of realism is given texture and quality by non-realism:

If no art, and no artist, can be wholly realistic, it is always important to see in a work of realism what the non-realistic elements are. . . . The paradox of Ibsen's realistic tragedy is that it depends so much on non-realistic elements for its success. 105

Bentley suggests that non-realism is a positive addition to a work: "Brecht is a realist, but non-realistic elements are of more and more importance as his art develops."¹⁰⁶

Bentley is aware that the search of the anti-realist school is similar to his own. They too are seeking an essence, and where that essence is found within the bounds of meaningful human experience, Bentley accepts the anti-realist style: "If an anti-realist can be shown to be at grips with reality, and not to be lost in technical dexterity, rococo ornament, or intellectual blah, there is nothing to hold against him."¹⁰⁷ It is clearly the focus on style as style--the tendency of formalism to be overcome with its own effects--which Bentley decries. As long as the elements of non-realism are presented within a meaningful and dramatic framework, they may add much to the total work. Art and life must deviate in order for essences to be seen; the surface of life must be selected and even cracked to reach the truth.

Again, Bentley mediates between extremes, the extremes of naturalism and non-realism. He rejects each extreme for its distance from the realistic center, naturalism because it does not attain the status of art and non-realism because it leaves life behind. He also rejects them because they offer no value-meaning to the spectator. Neither extreme contains an acceptable world view for Bentley.

Naturalism and expressionism, the twin poles of the Strindbergian mind, are two answers to the challenge of a Darwinian world. They are not philosophies. They are the two archtypical patterns of defeat in the modern world: defeat at the hands of a naturalistic nihilism and defeat at the hands of a compensatory supernaturalism.¹⁰⁸ That is to say that naturalism accepts a mechanistic determinism which removes man from the center of value, while expressionism hopes to overcome a Schopenhauerean pessimism by reaching for some personal ideal (often through an excessive interest in man's individual neuroses). Only realism, in Bentley's formulation, returns man to his pragmatist/humanist center of value, uniting both social and individual concerns.

The extreme poles of drama ignore the essential process which Bentley finds at the heart of the drama: dialectic. Dialectic is a heightened sense of conflict which reverberates on the ethical/moral plane. It is the primary dramatic method of getting to the essence of matters, according to Bentley, and it is based on actual conflicts which make up the drama of life. These conflicts, merely carried whole to the stage by the naturalists are not sufficient. They tend merely to be pictures of characters' neuroses. Conflict becomes dialectic by the concretization of values, or "the great and complex moral conflicts which are the proper subject matter of modern drama."¹⁰⁹

Nor do the expressionists and anti-realists reach the essence by avoiding the concrete side of dialectic. The dramatist cannot directly grasp his essences, nor can he do away with the interpretive power of the mind which is brought into play by dialectic. The anti-realist attempts to touch an essence without sufficient contact with human experience, which leads to an abstraction which denies art: "The purely human is as unreal an abstraction as the purely poetic and the purely theatrical. To leave out the intellect, the element of thought, is to deprive oneself of a great part of human awareness."¹¹⁰

It is the dialectic which impels the action of the drama, for Bentley says that "a playwright is a dialectician." In a real or human situation, the intellect is bound up with dialectic which must, in a drama of artistic merit, be a true dialectic, serious and concrete.

What the intelligence demands in the theatre (and I believe outside it too) is dialectics--a sense of the interplay of opposites. . . . But where the Living Theatre offers opposites, they are so opposite that their interaction is abstract and unreal. . . . Dialectics means that a proposition elicits a counterproposition; and dramatists are people with a keen sense of this to and fro. 111

Bentley sets the drama apart as special to the arts, and this becomes a part of his defense of realism. He quotes Yeats to suggest the drama's special relationship to the essence of art: "What attracts me to drama is that it is, in the most obvious way, what all the arts are upon a last analysis." Bentley says that although all art is "concerned with the bedrock of human experience," that drama is "peculiarly" concerned with this bedrock in that it is "more indifferent than the other arts to whatever is not actually touching it."¹¹²

Certainly if all art is about the essence of life, then the art which "presents human relationships . . . and nothing else" is unusually focused on its subject.¹¹³

Bentley uses this distinctiveness to support his analysis of the special nature of drama and to call for drama's separation from other arts based on its own unique form and methods. Drama's unique quality is that it is both language-centered and intended for live performance. The combination of language and performance produces a singular character which should not misguidedly be blended with other arts: "Today I think we would rather stress the legitimate differences between the arts. Their territories may be adjacent, but they are not identical."¹¹⁴

Language sets the drama apart from the visual and musical arts. Drama, "being presented through the medium of words, deals not only with affects, not only with objects . . . but also with concepts which music cannot touch at all and which a libretto cannot very freely handle."¹¹⁵ Bentley sees the central presence of language as the first necessary element of the theatre, and therefore as proof of a playwright's excellence: "Surely, a drama not verbalized is a drama not dramatized; the subordination of the words to other theatre arts is the death of the drama."¹¹⁶ Imbedded in language is the expression of the dramatist's mind which is so important to Bentley, and the ability to handle language with some expressive beauty is crucial to dramatic art.

In performance, the language of the play must lead back to the sources of language which are vast and often deeply buried. There is a need for realism in acting. The effect of Stanislavski's work with the

actor "is not necessarily to make words less important; it is rather, to make them more effective."¹¹⁷ The actor must discover the inner stimuli for language, must be in touch with the drives and motivations which eventuate in language. It is not just language, then, that suffuses dramatic art, but human personality and communication. Talking is man's way of dealing with reality.

Because of the complex relationship between language and performance, Bentley concludes that the unique quality of theatrical art is the presentation of the human experience by human beings in the fullness of living. The drama, being only language, is iconic in a semantic way, whereas the theatre is directly iconic: it is a developing picture of life.¹¹⁸ Bentley makes much of this quality: "The subject of drama being what is nowadays called 'interpersonal relations,' the art of the theatre, in which persons present persons to persons, is in a specially favorable position to set up live vibrations. . . ."¹¹⁹ It is in the leap from drama-as-literature to drama-as-theatre that drama attains its true uniqueness, for only in the theatre does an audience directly confront humanity, both as a subject for study and as an embodiment of that subject:

More exclusively than most other artists, the dramatist is concerned with the definition of man. Poet and painter may take a sunset for a subject; a playwright's primary job is always to send actors out onto a stage, each actor not only being a man, but also representing a man.¹²⁰

To use the material of the theatre--men--most effectively and fully is to support realism. This use requires no special art theory; to use men non-realistically requires more specific theory.

Bentley therefore sees realism not only as the best form for the modern drama (arguing from an analysis of society's needs), but also, on the basis of an aesthetic analysis of subject matter and materials, the proper form for drama at any time. The concrete depiction of man is the fullest elaboration of the art. It is a broad realism, however, with boundaries far from the center. Where the pattern is intelligible, there is sufficient realism. Where there is a subject matter bearing relation to human experience contained in the form, there is sufficient realism. The theatre must only remain faithful to the qualities of its primary materials--men--and to its special nature: human characters "are presented to human beings by human beings, and this is a degree of actuality and humanity unique in the annals of art."¹²¹

Aesthetic Experience

The experience of the play is the culmination of the aesthetic situation, especially in the public art of the theatre. Bentley's interest in the audience's experience of the play is concentrated on two general areas. First is the nature of audience perception of the theatrical event, the nature of intimacy and how the link between spectator and play can be enhanced. This includes the nature of the audience's reaction to the characters of the drama, the presence of empathy or identification as part of that reaction. Since Bentley feels that the audience watches with some detachment but also with empathy, aesthetic experience helps explain the combination of real and non-real which appear in his general theory.

The second area has to do with the greater relationship of drama and theatre to society, the nature of the perceiving community, including the effect of the play on the audience, which matter has been discussed in another context above. Here we shall see how Bentley criticizes both the commercial and the religious theatres' conceptions of the audience, how he replaces the idea of commonality with that of community and that of stasis with growth, for though art's nature is that of a formed and unified structure, its greatest effect is to move, shock (though not directly, on a purely sensuous level), and vivify.

To achieve the ideal value relationship with the play, Bentley suggests that the audience must watch it in a special way. This seems to follow from his inclination to see the art object, the play, as a special kind of thing, an expressive portrayal of human events designed for perception not as reality, but as a vision of reality. Bentley feels that some form of detachment or distance is needed between the audience and the play--not actual distance (though this may be called for), but something quite similar to what Edward Bullough describes as "Psychical Distance."¹²² Bullough's precepts appear to have influenced Bentley's thinking on the nature of aesthetic experience and will be helpful in explicating this nature as well as that of art in general, especially what Bullough calls art's "anti-realistic nature."¹²³

Bentley and Bullough share a similar view of the way the spectator looks at a play. Bentley begins to explain the nature of aesthetic perception by noting its difference from scientific inspection: 'When we watch, though we do not watch in the way we watch actual happenings, neither do we watch in the spirit of 'scientific detachment,' but always with some degree of emotional involvement.'¹²⁴ Bullough explains more

explicitly how we can watch with detachment but with emotion through "psychical distance" which "does not imply an impersonal, purely intellectually interested relation of such a kind." Emotions enter our perception of art but in a peculiar way: "cleared of the practical, concrete nature of [their] appeal. . . ."¹²⁵

The necessity of clearing the emotions of "practical, concrete . . . appeal" may be simplistically exemplified by the classic case of the yokel who jumps on stage to save Desdemona from "that black man," which is to say that distance pervades the knowledge of art as art. The danger of the spectator's coming too close to the art object in a practical way is that he will be under-distanced (as in the above case) and thus lose the proper benefit of the aesthetic relationship. The opposite danger would be for the spectator to become so disengaged with the art that no emotional contact could be made at all, a case of over-distance.

Bentley uses the concept of under-distance to explain two more complex problems in the theatre. Loss of distance helps him explain the aesthetic difficulty of having a "star" performer in the cast of a play: "With Ingrid Bergman on the stage, it is doubtful whether you could have an evening of drama. . . . Around every movie star . . . there is a pink aureole of glamour which inhibits dramatic proceedings."¹²⁶ Here the audience becomes under-distanced by taking a personal, non-aesthetic interest in the actress (or at least her professional persona) rather than in the character (aesthetic persona) she is playing. The need to have an audience watching with some detachment is at the basis of Bentley's distaste for modern attempts to return, in the theatre,

to some kind of orgiastic religious rite: "Theatres presuppose an audience; orgies presuppose total participation and total absence of mere onlooking. Otherwise we get bogged down in those two rather chilling perversions: exhibitionism and voyeurism."¹²⁷ It is significant to note that total sensuous participation, without detachment, would leave no room for the mind which is crucial to Bentley's concept of theatre experience.

The desire for some form of distance has made Bentley suspicious of too much literal intimacy in the theatre. The breaking of the physical barriers or space between the audience and the production can have a deleterious effect on perception, destroying the proper intimacy of the aesthetic response. He feels that "the spectator is entitled to a certain detachment."¹²⁸ Therefore it is self-defeating to preach the eradication of distance through

the cult of intimacy, which is based on false psychological assumptions, both as to what is the normal relation of audience and actor and as to what can be done to upset it. Perhaps the root error is the notion that you can with impunity simply ignore the barrier between public and player and cross it like an abandoned frontier.

The proof of this he sees in what actually happens when the actors cross the barrier: "The spectator is non-plussed, embarrassed, overpowered."¹²⁹ Actual intimacy in the theatre is not the method of getting real intimacy which is achieved, paradoxically, through aesthetic or psychical distance.

Bentley's protest against the "cult of intimacy"--that it destroys intimacy--is explained by a "law" which Bullough calls the "antinomy of Distance." It is that 'most desirable is the utmost decrease of distance without its disappearance.'¹³⁰ Considered as

a law governing physical space in the relation between actor and spectator, it shows the error of the intimacy cultists: they go too far by making distance disappear altogether.

It is possible, however, to achieve great intimacy with some distance. Bentley describes his reaction to Grotowski's Apocalypse which seems to exemplify the effects of the "antinomy of Distance" rather conclusively:

About halfway through the play I had a specific illumination. A message came to me--from nowhere, as they say--about my private life and self. . . . I don't recall this sort of thing happening to me in the theatre before. . . .

Your theatre is redeemed, it seems to me, by just this peculiar intimacy. . . . When I see your theatre . . . I note that your work . . . is a corrective to everything that happens here in your name. . . . In your theatre a spectator is a person and is allowed to keep his dignity, his individual separateness. Sometimes your actors come within inches of us, but they never lay hands on us, nor whisper in an individual ear. In the space our body occupies, we are inviolate. Now if the closeness to the actor brings us something extra, the fact that it is not a merger like sexual intercourse seems to me equally important, embodying a dialectical law of art according to which, if there is closeness, it must be balanced and, as it were, canceled by distance. 131

Bentley's use of sex as the metaphor for the ultimate in under-distancing is apt, for a personal sexual feeling is never aesthetically distanced; art is a sensuous realm, but 'purified, spiritualized, 'filtered' . . . by Distance.'¹³²

Aesthetic perception and the need to decrease distance without losing it offers valuable insight into Bentley's concept of realism as the best style for the modern theatre: by its nearness to the concrete elements of life it tends to decrease distance.¹³³ At the same time, it explains why Bentley is so interested in the non-realistic elements within realism: they maintain distance, enforcing the sense that what one sees is not life but art.

In a similar way, Bentley's analysis of the broad range of form/content relationships in realism relates to the functional span of psychical distance. Under and over-distancing mark the same polar extremes which are the limits to Bentley's realism: 1) a naturalism which will not achieve the distance necessary for art and 2) an idealism or anti-realism which will be so distanced, so abstract, that no contact can be made with the work.

Distance as a mode of perception does not fully explain Bentley's total view of the audience's reaction to the play which includes a Freudian process of identification or empathy with the characters (when they are realistically portrayed). This process, the psychological element of audience perception, is notable more for its similarity to life than for its dissimilarity. At a subconscious level--which may of course be made conscious by reflection--we react to characters in the drama in the same way we react to people in life, part of the "infantile basis of theatre." Bentley links all stage action and its subsequent appreciation by an audience to "two psychological processes . . . substitution of all and sundry persons for the few in one's own original background, and identification of oneself with someone else."¹³⁴ As an obvious proof of this, he offers the "crude" manner in which Broadway routinely delivers to its audiences a few characters who are easy to identify, surrounded by a clearly defined family.

That audiences want to identify with characters--or that they must--is commonly accepted. As a theory of audience response, this is generally referred to as "empathy."¹³⁵ Bentley contrasts this common sense theory of empathy with Brecht's theory of "alienation"

which is meant to do away with empathy so that the audience may watch the play with a critical, scientific objectivity. What Brecht overlooked in his theory, according to Bentley, is the fact that a certain alienation has always existed in the theatre--I think he is referring to distance, psychical or aesthetic--and that along with this alienation come the inescapable substitution and identifications that are a normal psychological process for the audience.¹³⁶

In this way Brecht's theory becomes, for Bentley, another example of the distanced nature of all art. This is the anti-realistic nature of art mentioned above. That Brecht has less empathy than Ibsenite realism is not to say that he does not have enough, for Bentley concludes that Brecht's works do have "stage-illusion, suspense, sympathy, identification."¹³⁷ Achieving the distance proper for art does not automatically destroy the empathy which is also proper: "Beauty itself, form itself, brings off the alienation effect; by making order out of chaos, it sets chaos at a distance where we can look at it."¹³⁸ Alienation in Brecht may be seen as an aesthetic strategy very much in the mainstream of Western art, just as Bentley's realistic theory is neatly within this mainstream.

Though the purpose of Brecht's strategy is to create distance, Bentley suggests that in one sense his theatricalism works to reduce distance as it reduces illusion, in effect coming "closer to the audience than does the illusionistic theatre." Illusion, be it of reality in naturalism or fantasy in symbolism, is designed to bring the spectator into a created world, picking him up at one end of the experience

and dropping him at the other. "Brecht's stage is frankly in the same building, in the same room, as the audience; it is made out of the same wood as the auditorium and belongs to the same spiritual realm." The unity of the actor and the audience in one world, the fact that the play is presented openly as art and not as an illusion of life, bristles with "many philosophical and aesthetic implications." A theatre that does not pick up and drop the spectator but maintains a constant reference to reality may be, says Bentley, a "superior strategy in that, precisely by effecting certain kinds of separation, it comes nearer to its audience in the end." Therefore, both the alienating effects and the destruction of illusion help the audience focus on the play as art work; the conditions and conventions created by Brecht in his plays allow him more elements to arrange, but only with the outcome of achieving greater contact with the spectator. Distance is important because it focuses attention on the artistic and spiritual, and Brecht's alienation, says Bentley, "is an instance of the principle: reculer pour mieux sauter."¹³⁹ Distance increases aesthetic intimacy.

It is possible that what has been seen in Bentley as an over-emphasis on the mental and intellectual qualities of drama is an out-growth of his intuitive grasp of art as experientially different from life, of the need for distance and anti-realism. The mind is very much aware of the methods of non-realism, less aware of the methods of illusionistic realism. There is a contradiction here between Bentley's acceptance of alienation and distance (which tends to bring a focus to form) and his earlier espousal of naked content, with form receding to the background. But that contradiction is mitigated by the fact that

awareness of content is itself alienating from the undiscriminating gush of emotion and sentimentality found in numerous non-serious plays.

Aesthetic emotion, washed of concrete appeal, seems to allow room for much awareness of the symbolic universality of the work of art.

Bentley has also shown much interest in the social nature of the drama, apart from the specific nature of aesthetic perception. It is social man which makes up the audience at a play, and yet Bentley's interest in both individual and society leads him to consider the communal rather than the mass characteristics of the audience response, leaving room for the individual within the collective. In addition, Bentley is aware of the need for pluralism within a general view of society, allowing for sub-groups within the wider collective. Bentley's analysis of society and audience response is a further instance of his criticism of commercialism and religious/"magical" dramatic theories.

Bentley is aware of the theatre's dependence on a group for both its survival and growth. "Drama is a social art. Although it does not require the support of the masses or any large class, it does require a tradition that lives in some group homogeneous enough to make a crowd in the theatre."¹⁴⁰ This describes the theatre's relation to society, and by extension that of the dramatist who must have a theatre in order to grow, must see his work in production.

The serious theatre needs, not a mass audience, but one made up of concerned individuals, excited by the potential of the theatre and not merely seeking entertainment. The idea that an art should appeal to a mass is anathema to Bentley, who prefers the idea of community: "Now, one of the ugliest facts about this world is that it contains

masses and not communities, and thus is given over to mass entertainment and not to communal imaginative experience." An appeal to the mass is predisposed to consider the lowest common denominator, an entertainment "valued chiefly as a relief from boredom, which is taken to be the normal state of mind." What is needed is a community, "an assembly of fully human beings with something in common, something relevant to the occasion."¹⁴¹ Bentley is searching for the qualities which will lead to an active interest in an experience that has growth potential, an audience that is alive, aware, interested, and focused--the kind of audience one often finds at dance recitals or concerts--people interested in the subject matter rather than people demanding amusement.

Bentley implies not only that such an audience does exist for theatre, but also that it can be fostered and made to grow. What is necessary to develop an audience is to separate those interested only in amusement from those who are more intellectually and aesthetically inclined. He is not developing a dual aesthetic, one for the masses and one for an elite community. He maintains a single aesthetic of excellence, and wishes to see some place established, within the commercially oriented theatre world, for a serious art theatre. Bentley's call for serious standards in the theatre is more affected by audience than a similar call in any other art form precisely because of theatre's public nature and the difficulty of its existence without community support.

Finally, in considering the nature of the audience and its reaction, Bentley is wary of psychological and political assumptions, as he calls them, which seek to deny the individuality of the aesthetic

response. The psychological assumption is made primarily by the proponents of a naive religious theatre who, like Artaud, see the experience of theatre as merging the individual audience members into a common whole. Bentley attacks this concept at its psychological base (are primitive group emotions really better than more adult and individual ones?) and from its political implications ('mystical theories of the theatre have been fostered by the modern flight from freedom, from decisions, from the self'). Similarly, he attacks the political assumption that "a healthy community consists of individuals with identical opinions, and that theatre requires such a community since it requires a united audience" as mere "totalitarianism." It is perfectly in accord with Bentley's psychological, political, and aesthetic views that he would conclude that "the group spirit of an audience is based on common acceptance of the drama, not on a common interpretation of it."¹⁴²

Given distance, given aesthetic awareness, given a communal sense in which an individual response is valid, what is the effect of theatre on the spectator? What kind of experience does Bentley feel he should have? That is to say, what is the value-function of theatre, its purpose, seen from the perspective of the experience of the art work? Like the relativist description of the subjective and objective sides of critical appreciation, the experience depends on strong feeling; like the contextualist, the experience must be distilled and intensified.

In Life, Bentley so strongly emphasizes the emotional content of the theatrical experience that it is no wonder he was afraid that people would think he had completely reversed his position from previous books.¹⁴³ He clarifies his feelings about emotion to show how they are based on concrete objects in the play and are quite often fused with ideas. Yet emotion is primary: "The living experience of a play, as of a novel, or a piece of music, is a river of feeling within us. . . ."¹⁴⁴ This river of emotion is of a particular kind, based on human needs: "A main reason for going to a play, as for reading a novel, will always be the need for emotions that are coherent and continuous as well as strong."¹⁴⁵ Emotion and experience are fused, and the quality of this fusion in art is always the contextualist one of strength and vividness: "When they expose themselves to an art human beings are seeking an intensification of their normal experience."¹⁴⁶ This explains the playwright's desire to discover material that pierces the conventional and the ordinary, a desire to find a "heightened mode of existence" so that the audience may be "astonished at revelations of the unsuspected."¹⁴⁷

The effect of such experience on the spectator is, like Aristotle's catharsis, difficult to define, but it is to be a particularly vivid learning experience, just as experience generally, when it is genuine, is learning. Moving aesthetic experiences transfigure the everyday world from a welter of impressions into a whole where human essences are grasped. Both tragedy and comedy transcend the negative situations from which they grow. It is an "aesthetic transcendence (of art over life), and a transcending emotion (awe in tragedy, joy in comedy)."

For Bentley, this transcendence has an irrational character, in that it lifts man's spirit "in defiance of the stated facts," yet both tragedy and comedy have the "same heuristic intent: self-knowledge."¹⁴⁸ It is as though the intensified experience/emotion of art lifts the individual to new levels of awareness--and not necessarily intellectual awareness. This is the function of art generally, but Bentley sees it as especially important in fragmented and experience-poor modern society. The "vehemence of attack" of modern art "is called for both by the conditions which provoke it and the torpor of the public that is addressed. . . . Modern art is upsetting. . . ." The reason that people will court such an upsetting experience, that there is an audience for modern art, is that the experience is "a shaking into life."¹⁴⁹ A great play can be a "revelation;" scales may fall from the eyes, and suddenly one may both see and live. This is the pleasure behind the experience of art.

Notes

1. Bentley sees himself as unifying two older views when he relates drama to theatre; the outcome is still traditional: "We shall rediscover what plays are only when we transcend both the narrowly theatrical and the narrowly academic ('miscalled 'literary') approach and see a play as a whole--that is, as the work of a writer designed for the theatre. It must be performable. It must be able to reach its fullest meaning in production. But it is also a treatment of a subject and an expression of an artist's mind. The playwright conceives the whole thing as it should be on the stage, just as a composer conceives a symphony that is later transmitted to us from the concert platform." Bentley, Search, p. 15.

2. I have adapted this list from Hilda Hein's compilation in "Performance as an Aesthetic Category," Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism, XXVIII (Spring, 1970), 381-6. In this article, Hein argues against the view taken by Bentley, that the performer is an interpreter, and seeks to establish performance as a separate art. Later I will show (Ch. III) Bentley's awareness of acting as a separate art from drama.

3. Bentley has offered much insight into the depth of his study of psychology by recounting the genesis and development of what is arguably his most important book, Life, which he has called "the nearest I've gotten to a theory of the drama." It appears that at least three factors came together to form the content of the six lectures which Bentley delivered at Harvard in 1960-61, later rewritten as the book. One of them was a Freudian analysis which Bentley underwent during 1957-1960, an analysis which not only helped him personally, but also led him to intensified research on Freud in whom he had previously maintained a long personal and professional interest. A second factor was that while in analysis he worked on the introduction to a book of French farces, Let's Get A Divorce! (New York: Hill and Wang, 1958), and, influenced by Freud's theory of humor, produced the essay "The Psychology of Farce." After "discovering" that farce, commonly considered a minor form, actually had a serious psychology involving the release of suppressed desires at its base, he went on to re-evaluate melodrama and other basic forms for their psychological import. The farce essay was "the trunk from which the branches came." Though his study of Freud helped generate the book, Bentley today sees its greatest problem as a slavish devotion to Freud, an almost blinding need to acknowledge the master.

The third influencing factor is the guide to the book's concept. Bentley notes that the theory of drama which emerges in the book is not the Brechtian one which many expected of him, but is Pirandellian developed from Pirandello's idea that "life is theatre." Though the idea comes from Pirandello and not from modern psychology, Bentley is aware of its interaction with the theories of Freud himself, Erving Goffman, and Jacob Moreno. The book is more individually oriented than socio-logically. Bentley says "It is a totally psychological book with a little philosophy around the psychology--the little philosophy is Pirandello."

4. Bentley, What, p. 265.
5. Bentley, Commitment, p. 177.
6. Bentley, Life, p. 15.
7. Bentley, Event, p. 150.
8. Bentley, Thinker, p. 166.
9. Ibid, p. 71.
10. Bentley, War, p. 68.
11. Bentley, Thinker, p. 187.
12. Bentley, Commitment, p. 106.
13. Bentley's view is quite similar to that of R. G. Collingwood who distinguishes between art and craft along these same lines in The Principles of Art (New York: Oxford University Press, 1958), CH. II.
14. Bentley, What, p. 256.
15. Ibid., p. 262.
16. Ibid., p. 256.
17. Bentley, Commitment, p. 168.
18. Bentley, What, pp. 256-7.
19. Bentley, Search, p. 60.
20. Bentley, Thinker, p. 54.
21. Bentley, What, p. 264.
22. Ibid.
23. Bentley, Commitment, p. 115.
24. Bentley, What, p. 267.
25. Bentley, Bernard Shaw, pp. 104-5.
26. Bentley, What, p. 264.
27. Bentley, Life, p. 6.
28. Ibid., pp. 9-12.

29. Ibid., pp. 35-6.
30. Ibid., p. 59.
31. Ibid., p. 65.
32. Considering the common background of pragmatism, the similarities between Bentley and John Dewey's Art as Experience (New York: Capricorn Books, 1958) are not very surprising. Dewey says that we turn to art to have a kind of experience that is not common in life (Ch. III) and that since we do live in a world in which suspense, crisis, and resolution exist, that art must reflect these real qualities (pp. 16-17).
33. Bentley, Life, pp. 53-4.
34. Ibid., pp. 45-50.
35. Ibid., p. 43.
36. Bentley, Thinker, p. 227.
37. Ibid., p. 220.
38. Bentley, War, p. 11.
39. Bentley, Search, p. 4.
40. Bentley, What, p. 266.
41. Bentley, War, p. 339.
42. Bentley, What, p. 179.
43. Ibid., p. 126.
44. Bentley, Search, p. 91.
45. Bentley, What, p. 15.
46. Bentley, Search, p. 169.
47. Bentley, Search, p. 42.
48. Bentley, Thinker, p. 169.
49. Bentley, What, p. 254.
50. Bentley, Thinker, p. 2.
51. Ibid., p. 7.
52. Ibid., pp. 182-3.

53. Ibid., p. 168.
54. Bentley, War, p. 383,
55. Bentley, Thinker, p. 46.
56. Bentley, Search, p. 50,
57. Ibid., p. 93.
58. Ibid., p. 77.
59. Ibid., p. 6.
60. Bentley, Life, p. 105.
61. Kenneth Burke, Counter-Statement (Los Altos, Cal.: Hermes Publications, 1953), p. 31.
62. Bentley, Life, p. 13.
63. Ibid., p. 29.
64. Burke, op. cit., p. 35.
65. Ibid., p. 41.
66. Bentley summarizes the controversy: "Some have said that the end of drama, and art in general, is pleasure, and others have said that it is instruction. . . ." What, p. 251.
67. Bentley, War, p. 346. Bentley's critique of society could be made from a variety of political positions. Considering his socialism, however, this appears to be part of a Marxist orientation softened by liberal humanism.
68. Bentley, Thinker, p. 233.
69. Bentley, What, p. 252.
70. Bentley, Commitment, p. 193.
71. Bentley, Life, p. 111.
72. Aristotle: "To be learning something is the greatest of pleasures not only to the philosopher but also to the rest of mankind. . . ." In Life, p. 112. Butcher's analysis of Aristotle's Poetics concludes that art's "end is pleasure, but the pleasure peculiar to that state of enjoyment in which perfect repose is united with perfect energy." I. e., a pleasure which is good for mankind. In What, p. 252.

73. Bentley, Thinker, pp. 219-20. Kenneth Burke reaches a similar, though directly political and much more sharply defined, conclusion in "The Nature of Art Under Capitalism," in The Philosophy of Literary Form (New York: Vintage Books, 1961). "Hence we feel that the moral breach arising from vitiation of the work-patterns calls for a propaganda art." p. 277.

74. Bentley, Life, p. 112.

75. Bentley, War, p. 339.

76. Bentley quotes from Walter Kerr's How Not to Write a Play (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1955) in What, p. 258.

77. Bentley, What, p. 260.

78. Rudolf Arnheim, "The Expressiveness of Visual Forms," in Rader, op. cit., p. 316.

79. Bentley, Commitment, pp. 195-6.

80. Ibid., pp. 196-9.

81. Ibid., pp. 222-3. This is Bentley's later view of Brecht. His earlier statement (p. 65) about the deadening effect of final truth on creativity, while it may retain some validity as a generalization and some instances, has been superceded in the case of Brecht. In the interview, Bentley expressed some wonderment that he ever would have considered Brecht's Marxism a negative factor in the art.

82. Ibid., p. 228.

83. Ibid., p. 225.

84. Some took Playwright as the explication of a totally intellectual aesthetic, but Bentley has tried to make his position there very clear: "It takes as its starting point the undoubted fact that ideas are much more prominent in modern than in older drama; it shows that some modern plays are 'drama of ideas' in the special sense that ideas are not simply used but questioned and discussed; but it does not suggest that an Ibsen or a Shaw or a Pirandello can be a successful playwright by mere brainpower or idea mongering. It assumes aesthetic criteria and defends the thinking playwright, not against Shakespeare and Sophocles, but against the unthinking playwrights of Broadway and West End." Thinker, p. 258. In this section and the previous I discuss Bentley's sociological reasons for admiring the "drama of ideas."

85. Bentley, Life, p. 104.

86. Ibid., p. 108.

87. Bentley, Search, p. 47.

88. Bentley, Event, p. 72.

89. Bentley, Search, pp. 57-8.

90. Bentley, Life, p. 142. Again, his views about the "drama of outrage" presume the playwright may explore a valid point of view about his material.

91. Bentley, Life, pp. 90-1.
92. Bentley, Thinker, p. 51.
93. Ibid., p. 110.
94. Ibid., p. 106.
95. Bentley, Bernard Shaw, p. 118.
96. Ibid., pp. 129-30.
97. Bentley, Life, p. 146.
98. Ibid., pp. 145-7.
99. Janet Malcolm describes the bleak prospects of this process as it appears in Freud: ". . . the most precious and inviolate of entities--personal relations--is actually a messy jungle of misapprehensions, at best an uneasy truce between powerful solitary fantasy systems. . . . We cannot know each other. We must grope around for each other. . . . We cannot see each other plain." "Profiles (Aaron Green--Part I)," The New Yorker, November 24, 1980, p. 56.
100. Bentley, Life, p. 191.
101. Ibid., 187.
102. Bentley, Thinker, p. 14.
103. Ibid., p. 4.
104. Ibid., p. 21.
105. Ibid., p. 93.
106. Ibid., p. 220.
107. Bentley, Search, p. x.
108. Bentley, Thinker, p. 41. There is evidence here and elsewhere that Bentley does not separate the theoretical movements of expressionism and symbolism as completely as he might.
109. Bentley, What, p. 4.
110. Bentley, Thinker, p. 204.
111. Bentley, War, p. 352.
112. Bentley, Search, p. ix.
113. Bentley, Life, 62-3.

114. Bentley, Thinker, p. 64.
115. Ibid., p. 61.
116. Ibid., p. 46.
117. Bentley, Event, p. 84.
118. Following Virgil Aldrich's definition of "material" as those physical elements which the artist uses to form art works, we may see the primary material of literature (drama) as written language and the primary material of theatre as men. The subject matter of literature may be life, but its materials are essentially different, whereas in the theatre, the subject matter--man--and the material--man--are the same. This speaks in favor of Bentley's point. See: Virgil Aldrich, Philosophy of Art (Englewood Cliffs, N. J.: Prentice Hall, 1963), Ch.II.
119. Bentley, War, p. 346.
120. Bentley, Event, p. 144.
121. Bentley, War, p. 345.
122. Edward Bullough, "Psychical Distance," in Rader, op. cit., pp. 368-84. Theories of aesthetic perception which emphasize distance suggest that the spectator is disengaged from ordinary looking and re-engaged in an aesthetic way of looking that is essentially different from ordinary perception. The extent to which Bentley thinks there is a unique form of experience called "aesthetic" is difficult to tell since he does not systematically develop his view of perception. I will discuss "distance" in Bentley as different in character from ordinary perception though not different in kind. Bentley is aware of Bullough's article which he calls "much quoted." Life, p. 40.
123. Bullough, "Psychical Distance," p. 377.
124. Bentley, Life, p. 156.
125. Bullough, loc. cit., pp. 371-2.
126. Bentley, Search, p. 8..
127. Bentley, War, p. 353.
128. Bentley, Search, p. 144. In the physical arrangement of the theatre space, Bentley is partial to the proscenium stage and the Greek stage where the audience sat above the performance.
129. Bentley, War, p. 353.
130. Bullough, p. 375.
131. Bentley, War, p. 381.
132. Bullough, p. 383.

133. Considering Bentley's sociological analysis, this will be especially true in a society that lacks common beliefs or conventions. The non-realistic theatre tends to be more dependent on theory than the realistic (there is proof for this in the often-noted "fact" that greater knowledge and sophistication about art leads to greater ability to appreciate the non-real or stylized), and therefore the non-real requires a good deal of cohesive knowledge to make its intentions understood.

134. Bentley, Life, pp. 157-60.

135. Bentley is aware that empathy as used here is different from Vernon Lee's theory of Einfühlung which is one explanation of how human qualities are transferred to visual arts. Life, p. 160.

136. Ibid., pp. 161-2.

137. Bentley, Thinker, pp. 218-20.

138. Bentley, Search, p. 145.

139. Ibid., p. 144.

140. Bentley, Thinker, p. 189.

141. Bentley, Search, p. 36.

142. Ibid., pp. 363-4.

143. He expressed this concern in the interview.

144. Bentley, Life, p. 3.

145. Ibid., p. 39.

146. Bentley, War, p. 338.

147. Bentley, Commitment, pp. 181-2.

148. Bentley, Life, pp. 308-9.

149. Ibid., pp. 344-5. There is some implication here and in the section on the Function of Art that Bentley sees art's purpose as breaking down old patterns, freeing the mind and the spirit, creating more disorder than order. Such a theory of disorder receives full discussion in Morse Peckham's Man's Rage for Chaos (Philadelphia: Chilton Books, 1965).

CHAPTER III
THE PRESENTATION OF THE PLAY

Theatricalism

Bentley, we have seen, focuses his theory on the drama. The play is the expression of an artist's vision which contains the central plan for the theatrical production. This view places the arts of the theatre--acting, directing, and design--at the service of the drama, their purpose being to make manifest the qualities which the dramatist has created in the play. Although he is aware of both the necessity for and the power of the arts of theatrical presentation, Bentley considers them to be "empty" when not tied intimately to the presentation of a good play. "Theatricalism," the sense of what the arts of theatre add to the play, is an important element in the drama for Bentley, but he is suspicious of the power of the theatre to take precedence over the drama. He therefore condemns the "theatricalism" of those theorists and practitioners who place the arts of theatrical presentation before those of the drama.

The central importance of the drama is so firmly seated in Bentley that he gives it continual emphasis. His focus on the written play led him, as drama critic of a weekly journal, to try to read as many of the plays he reviewed as possible. He felt that reading helped fund his judgment of the dramatic quality of the plays he reviewed to

a greater extent than he might have done from production alone. And because of his strong attachment to drama, he declined writing about acting, when it was not in relation to dramatic content:

I have made a large emotional investment in dramaturgy. What-ever I may think, I feel that the play's the thing. . . . I have never been coaxed out of it by outstanding performers who appear in bad plays . . . but only by some few who can do without plays altogether, such as Charlie Chaplin and Martha Graham--whom it is also possible, incidently, to regard as playwrights. 1

Although he refuses to consider the theatrical arts apart from drama, Bentley recognizes their importance and their necessary relationship to the drama. In his view, a good play contains a sense of the theatrical. The playwright designs a play for performance in the theatre; he creates roles that have histrionic viability and he devises a structure that will transmit his drama with force in the theatre:

"In any art that requires performance, the matter of performance enters in-to the process of creation and modifies the nature of the art itself."² Bentley is aware that the concept of performance is prior to the drama, for without the idea of performance, there would be no reason for writing plays. On a practical level, he sees the playwright's need to make his way in the theatre in order to write great plays, offering, as example, the case of Yeats who perhaps never wrote "great" plays because of his distrust of and distaste for the theatre and its commer-cial relationship to crass society.³

Bentley's conviction that the drama is central to the theatre is an outgrowth of his desire for meaning in the drama and of his emphasis on structure and the Aristotelian quality of organic unity in the play. Since meaning is tied to language, the playwright's work is

primary. Also, since for Bentley the real power of the play lies in a strong dramatic structure, a playwright is needed to create this structure. In the theatre the play becomes the central guide to presentation, offering a unified design, a structure to which the meaning of the play is bound. In Bentley's view, the playwright controls the theatrical presentation through the play. When the responsibility for design unity and meaning are shifted in great measure to actors or the director, then they take on the function of playwright.

The issue of design unity is complex because it is difficult to specify an exact, ideal, or standard design and meaning for each play. The theatrical presentation of a play is subject to what amounts to an infinity of variables which depend on the many artists who complete the design. Most critics would agree--Bentley among them--that there are limits within which the meaning of a dramatic work must be contained, but there is room for much variability of judgment within those limits. In the theatre, as in other arts, the principal organizing function of expressive design cannot be escaped, and for Bentley it must come through the dramatic form of the work, whether it is written by one person, developed improvisationally by a group of actors, or provided by a director working on a script in his own particular manner.

Bentley's view that the dramatic script is a work of art largely complete in itself--and that presentation merely tends to extend this completeness--contrasts with a strong movement in modern theatre aesthetics to consider the drama as merely the basis on which a separate work of theatre is developed. Many modern theoreticians take the text

as a "pre-text" which will be the basis, not for an interpretation, but for a confrontation in which actors and directors will discover and develop in the script those things which interest or impress them in the process of their own artistic search and expression. Where Bentley sees the play as coherent, others see it as an incomplete structure which can only be completed by the process of theatrical discovery. Bentley is concerned with the meaning of the play which the actors and director agree upon in rehearsal and present. Directors like Richard Schechner are primarily interested in the work's meaning as it reverberates for the actors and director within the context of their production and which, in addition, can only be discovered through the process of production.⁴ Bentley's view is that the theatre stabilizes around the dramatic art work. The contrasting view is that theatrical art is wrought by theatre artists, and that not only each production, but each performance of a play is a separate art work.

At base, this modern view that value and truth in a play are rediscovered in each production posits an even less stable world than Bentley's. As a rational humanist Bentley assumes that the playwright has expressed a vision of reality which remains, within certain cultural and historical bounds, constant. Schechner assumes much less constancy, and that actors create this vision each time they go on stage.

Though these views are radically different, in practice Bentley would have little argument with the modern school if the product of the creative search and expression of director and actors were meaningful, neither reductive of the complex and concrete world of the play nor in

itself shallow or unintelligent.⁵ He would simply return to his overall theory and note that a new play was being formed. Where value-expressive content, embodied in well-formed dialogue, plot, and action are at the center of drama and performance, both are valid.

In condemning "theatricalism," it is not the theatre Bentley is against. His stance is, once more, non-extremist, in that he asks the dramatist not to rely excessively on the effects of the theatre which are undeniably pleasing to an audience. His caution with theatricality is not a denial of its necessity, but an aesthetic argument against excess, hollow effect, and a focus on technique which emerges prior to and apart from the meaning of the work. He cautions the dramatist not to over-emphasize the theatrical to the detriment of the dramatic:

Schiller is theatrical alike in the good and the bad sense. He knows and respects the theatrical medium. He can think in terms of stage spectacle and stage movement. His notes, his stage directions, his work in the theatre, not to mention the main body of his drama, bear witness to an interest in the effects of actual production on an audience. And he goes too far. ⁶

Bentley is suspicious of the power of the theatre to overpower the drama, of the power of theatricality when it is cut off from good drama. He decries both the craftsman-like ability of the playwright to produce theatrical images without substance and the ability of theatre artists to achieve a pleasing and even moving form through excellence in acting, design, and lighting, even when there is no viable drama. His campaign against the negative force of theatricalism is based on the schism which may occur between the dramatic and the theatrical--in a sense, between content and form. It is directed

against three groups: 1) playwrights, generally in the commercial school, who substitute vigorous theatrical form for true search and substance; 2) critics and academics who emphasize theatricalism as though it were the point or desired end of theatre; and 3) serious theatre artists who emphasize the elements of theatrical production as though they alone were the crucial elements of the art.

The negative character of groups 1) and 2) is based on the substitution of formulas for artistic search and has its source in the product-orientation of commercialism--a search for salable entertainment rather than substantive meanings. Even when not commercially oriented, the commercial model pervades the idea that the modes of the theatre can be learned and applied to the production of any play, which is the methodology of institutions which teach theatre in this country: emphasis is on the theatre as such.

The standard became a doctrine, the central doctrine of drama in the schools and universities today: that drama is not primarily a form of poetry, a vision of life, and expression of the dramatist's nature, or anything comparable to other works of art, but a matter of theatrical technique in which the chief factor is the existence of an audience. Theatre is a means of communication, and nobody is to ask what is communicated. 7

Bentley speaks of the American use of the word "theatre" to designate an art in itself, one based rather grossly on formal properties which will have an impact on an audience. When these properties are made into the single criterion for judging quality, apart from content, then what results is one level of form-content split. The American use of the word "theatre" as a criterion has been noted by other commentators:

Unfortunately the true meaning of the American word "theatre" has been blunted by common usage. When they say now that a play is "good theatre", or "bad theatre", they mean that it has punch or is tediously lacking in it--in brief that it is, or is not, vigorously theatrical; and they are able to declare that, though a piece has no genuine critical value, it is, for all that, good theatre.⁸

Bentley's point is that vigorous theatricality is not the source of excellence in the theatre. That source is in the form and meaning of the play.

Bentley is able to reach a conclusive judgment about the theatricalism of the commercial theatre, but about the theatricalism of the non-realist avant-garde he has some mixed feelings. Though he is predisposed by theory not to like the formalism of the expressionists and other non-realists like Cocteau, he is not immune to their search for theatrical substance. Bentley is aware of the expressive quality of beauty, and he appreciates a certain amount of free or formal expression even when he eventually condemns it for meaninglessness. He says that both Cocteau and the German expressionists, though they made "genuine attempts to grapple with real and cruelly difficult theatrical problems . . . suffered from hollowness."⁹

Bentley does some shifting between understanding expressionism and dismissing it. He says that "the theatre maniacs were the making of expressionism. They needed a drama without substance, so that light and color and design could have pride of place."¹⁰ Yet he defends The Ghost Sonata against critic Bernard Diebold's charge that it is a theatricalist evasion of the problem of weak dramaturgy by asserting that the play has a "core" of meaning expressed in "superficial qualities: color, rhythm, shifting tempi, elan, cleverness, atmosphere, and theatricality."¹¹ He applauds Barrault's direction of The Plague

for bringing the drama into sharp and physical focus (theatre being a "highly physical art"): "Barrault brought to Camus' only semidramatized idea his sense of color and visual form, of sound and rhythm, of actors as individual bodies and as bodies in groups, and made of it a musical-choreographic work. . . ."¹² He recognizes the good in Cocteau's "fantastic, hilarious, grotesque, and somehow moving terms," his "richness of texture,"¹³ but finally rejects his "awful vacuity . . . a deliberate but in no way justified meaninglessness."¹⁴

It is clear that the cognitive demands based on concrete representation of life divert Bentley from such non-realism. He counters Cocteau's desire that people "believe" rather than "understand" his works by asking "how can one decide what to believe except by understanding the rather various and mutually incompatible possibilities?"¹⁵ Ultimately, for Bentley, texture in the theatrical elements of the play and atmospherics created by lighting and music are no substitute for plot. Plot is a dramatic element, the spine of the drama, the central forming element of a play. Plot, or some identifiable dramatic structure, is what is lacking in the non-realistic plays which lie outside of Bentley's appreciation. He also disagrees with John Van Druten's endorsement of the so-called "plotless" play, pointing out that The Cherry Orchard, Member of the Wedding, and The Glass Menagerie are not without structure, but merely have a more subtle and submerged structure than the well-made play.¹⁶ The play of "atmosphere" is often supported by stagecraft and lighting. Bentley prefers a play which is plot and not much else to a play which is many things without plot.¹⁷

In the theatre, as in the drama, we return to the importance of form--for that is what plot is--to explain the power of the play as an art.

This power is involved with the theatrical, but not limited to it. It grows out of the dramatic form which unfolds, through time, on the stage. This is important; since theatre is a time art, its form is not immediately perceived and the spectator is not attracted by a whole form but by an "anticipation of completion" of a form which he knows (in a really good play) to be complete.¹⁸ As in Burke's "eloquence," an appetite is aroused and then satisfied. Dramatic form is "in suspense" until the unfolding is complete and the appetite is satisfied. The arts of theatrical presentation cannot, of themselves, account for the process of dramatic form. They can only show a surface movement or make a strong sensory impression. The play's "commanding form which the author has composed by writing the lines of the play" is necessary,¹⁹ and it fuses the actor and visual elements of the production into a whole. The effects of the theatre stem from dramatic form as embodied in a theatrical medium, and for this reason Bentley subsumes the theatrical within the dramatic.

Acting

Although Bentley sees the art of acting as tied to the demands of the drama, he also recognizes it as primary to the drama (both historically and conceptually), because without the idea of performance, there would be no drama.²⁰ Both the concept and the art of acting permeate the job of the playwright. "Of course," Bentley tells an aspiring playwright, "it is true that playwrights must learn the art of the theatre, and above all its central art: that of acting."²¹

Though the play is the central plan for the theatre, the actor is the expressive medium and, as we have seen, must be taken into account from the point of conception of the play. Not only the playwright, but also the critic must know the art of acting, for "there is much in the dramatic arts that literary criticism does little to help us understand."²²

Bentley's view of acting, its process and its style, fits well within his general aesthetic: the actor is involved in an expressive and vital representation of human essences, not in sheer imitative naturalism. The poles of naturalism and anti-realism are represented, in acting, by "empathy" and "alienation"--roughly corresponding to Stanislavskian and Brechtian theories--and for Bentley the best acting partakes of the dialectic between the two. The actor is himself an artist, and he creates a performance in which truth is expressed. His own psychology is part of his material, as are the words of the play he is acting, but it is a personality stripped of idiosyncracy and converted into aesthetic stuff. Even more directly than he suggests that the playwright cannot become great on the basis of mere brain power, Bentley strongly suggests that the artistry of acting may be intuitive rather than intellectual. Perhaps this is because the art of acting cannot of itself be seen to mean anything, but certainly in his discussion of acting, Bentley takes closer account of the intuitive.

That Bentley should consider acting as central to the drama fits well with his view of the basis of drama in life. Acting is the art which most directly relates to Aristotle's identification of

imitation as a basic urge found in children and men. The Freudian role playing of life is also mirrored directly in acting, for the actor makes conscious and deliberate a process of personality discovery which is similar to our normal (and subconscious) method of understanding ourselves and others. The very process of acting is the supreme development of our infantile predilections and adult modes of behavior. As Bentley says, "if life is action, it should not seem so surprising that acting--going through our actions again and again--is a universal art."²³ The playwright writes for actors, so that acting is not only the basic theatre art, but is also, in one sense, the end of playwriting.

Acting may overpower playwriting, a fact which does not please Bentley, we have seen, but of which he is aware. A great actor may transform a mediocre play into art; this cannot, however, be easily documented because what the actor transforms it into, "a piece of theatrical art," is a "non document."²⁴ Because the history of acting lacks documentation, acting's historical nature is difficult to specify, but what we do know of it supports arguments that acting is an important art even apart from great playwriting. Bentley notes that the quality of acting is what keeps the theatre alive in periods where there are no great playwrights, especially in revivals of plays that are great. Hence there has arisen the tradition of serious actors proving their mettle in the plays of Shakespeare.²⁵ This fact helps establish acting as an art in its own right.

The actor is linked to the play by the role which, as Bentley describes it, cries out for embodiment: "The case for professional acting, and the best professional acting at that, is that the great

dramatic roles have in general been written for it and cannot fully exist without it."²⁶ Bentley's distinction between character and role is still more conclusive evidence that the drama and the actor are intertwined. "Character" is a general term meaning any devised person in any medium, while a role is a highly compressed form of character designed for performance. The role must then be compact, actable, visible in a few scenes, with very clear characteristics. The creation of a role is somewhat more difficult than the creation of a character, but the creation of a good role which is also a good character is more difficult still. "To create dramatis personae which are great both as roles and characters is to be, in this department at least, a great playwright."²⁷

It is difficult to deny the importance of acting in the theatre; it is also difficult to describe the process of acting. The actor must perform a role, but he must also bring life to the role and to the theatre. It is difficult to say how this is done, not in the least because there is no accepted vocabulary to describe acting, or at least no common definition of words like "representational" and "presentational" (used to describe two styles of acting). This is a factor contributing to Bentley's sense of "mortification" over how little he has written about the acting he has seen.²⁸ He has, in fact, written much less about acting than about drama, but he offers sufficient commentary to suggest that he sees an important tension in acting between the inner-psychological theory of Stanislavski and the cooler, more reserved and detached approach of Brecht. Generally, he wants some qualities of both.

While favoring both psychological imitation and Brechtian distance, Bentley must put some stress on the latter. This follows his general analysis of the predominance of imitation and naturalism in 1950's American acting, from which he concludes that, of the traditional poles of acting, "natural" and "artificial," American actors are neglecting the "art." These terms, he says, have little meaning out of context because "dramatic art, like all other art, necessarily involves both imitation and selection, nature and artifice, truth and beauty. We critics want the right balance, so we put our weight on the side contemporary theatre is neglecting." Honesty in character portrayal is desirable, but so is a sense of style and technique. He feels that contemporary acting has gone too far in the direction of the natural: "Betterton and Garrick were congratulated on their naturalness, but just compare their portraits with performances by actors of our current nose-picking school! To say that their naturalness had its limits is only to reiterate that they were actors."²⁹

Bentley maintains a positive view of Stanislavski's internal approach in part because of its insights into language. Bentley reveres the language-oriented actor as a result of his drama-oriented aesthetic: "The actor who can extract everything from every phrase and verbal nuance is the best actor, even if he can do nothing else." But he is not interested in language as elocution, and he therefore emphasizes Stanislavski's search for the inner motivations behind language because language is only the outward expression of deeper and more complex "responses to stimuli, like gestures."³¹ This makes the evocation of the reality of language very important and qualifies the work of the actor,

at least in rehearsal: to find the inner, psychological sources of speaking so that the audience may see words "springing from a situation, from a character, from a query, a blow, or a snort."³²

But it is not enough for the actor to imitate the manner of life, for he is the expressive medium of the theatre, in the position of extending the design of another artist, but filling it with his own expressive sense of life. Like art itself, the actor must be vivid, must perform with an unusual intensity: "To 'live' on stage means to do more than live off stage, it means to give off life, to make it audible and visible, to make of it a projectile. . . ." And for Bentley, the expressive nature of the art seems to precede its imitative nature in acting: "What acting testifies to in dramatic art is not in the first place its imitative character but its exaggerative character."³³

We have seen that in art Bentley sees expression as being tied in with the nature of beauty, and so he defines the work of the actor in active and expressive terms that include both body and personality: "The actor is closer to the acrobat than to the artist's model, since he exhibits his body largely for what it can do. And what an actor's body can do is expressive rather than lovely, and may be expressive, indeed, in the least lovely mode, such as grotesque comedy."³⁴ It is this expressive character he has in mind when he describes Bert Lahr's performance in a typical piece of Broadway comedy: "The result [of Lahr's performance] is that the even surface of routine entertainment is broken by eruptions of sheer art. . . . Lahr's performance has about it a very embarrassing quality--beauty . . . his personality . . . expresses a criticism of life. . . ."³⁵

Bentley implies that the exaggerative and expressive nature of acting is possible both with the Stanislavskian approach (as it was interpreted in America), through a kind of hyper-naturalism, and with the Brechtian concept of detachment from character. Bentley is less responsive to the Stanislavskian manner, that of the Actors' Studio, because of its tendency to merely copy life and because of the limitations of its emotional method. At its most naturalistic and self-indulgent, Bentley disparages the work of the Actors' Studio as "nose-picking" and overinvolved with neurasthenics. It is clear to him, however, that this style of acting, perhaps because of an intensified focus on the self, an exaggeration of the psychological, is exactly what enlivens the most prominent American dramas of the period, those of Williams, Miller and other emotional realists.

The Actors' Studio style is developed, Bentley notes, from much concentration "not on technique itself, but on a kind of truthfulness of feeling through which, it is hoped, the action on stage will come to life." To a certain extent this is good, he says, because the stage requires a sense of "life" and action before it requires "fine elocution or eloquent style." This method is limited, however, by its excessive focus on a single kind of dramatic movement--"movement of the nerves."³⁶ Where the play's action depends on an intense depiction of "neurosis" rather than the moral-ethical conflicts which Bentley prefers, this kind of acting works well. It is, however, a considerably less fruitful approach to classical and much of the European drama. The limitations of this approach lead Bentley to desire a less inner-psychological kind of acting.

He finds this in the Brechtian approach, which he sees as prevalent in much good European acting and "close to the practice of our leading comedians."³⁷ He describes the approach as broad rather than limited, complex rather one-sided, and intellectual as well as emotional:

The best kind of acting is always that which seems simple but is complex in its effects, which gives an impression of simplicity but which is actually subtle and many-sided in its workings. . . . Acting may be called fresh, vital, and modern when it leaves behind what may be called the Ibsen-Chekhov-Stanislavski period, during which actors learned to embody a mood and sustain it during the whole evening, and attempts at a freer, cooler manner in which a wider range of quickly changing moods is achievable; in which a story or a man's character is not defined by a single atmosphere, above all not by an emotion that carries all before it, forbidding other emotions and all intellect to exist. ³⁸

This approach offers variety and --important to Bentley--intellect on the stage. It is close to Brecht's descriptions of cool, "alienated" acting. Bentley gives a specific example of Brecht's theory in practice when he describes how an Italian comedian acts "stiffness" while his "out stretched hand is not stiff. It is in a position of stiffness, but it is relaxed."³⁹ Since Bentley sees Brecht's dramatic mode as that of a particularly satirical and bitter comedy, it is fitting that the practices of comic acting would have influenced his acting theory.

If Bentley seems to prefer cool, Brechtian acting over emotional, Stanislavskian acting, it is because of his desire to emphasize "art" in acting and because he does not, in effect, see Brechtian acting as excluding imitation and realism but as combining them with a broader expressiveness, uniting elements of both realism and non-realism.

To those who accuse Brecht of denying basic principles of Western art, imitation and realism, Bentley retorts that this is not so:

They [the detractors of Brecht] are right, I think, when they observe that illusion is inherent in the art of acting and thus in all theatre. They are wrong only if they assume that the Narrative Realist eliminates illusion altogether. Illusion is a matter of degree, and a lesser degree of it is not necessarily less dramatic than a higher degree of it.⁴⁰

For Bentley, the best acting, like the best drama, mediates extremes or maintains a tension between extremes: "His [Lee J. Cobb's] performance has a double action: it draws you in and it holds you away. In the jargon of theatre aesthetics, there is empathy and there is alienation. I submit that this is the paradox--or better the dialectic--of first rate acting."⁴¹ Acting is both imitative and expressive, emotional and intellectual, and the best American actors demonstrate this by "not wallowing in sordid details, or merely reproducing the facts of life, but [by] seizing the essence of those facts, and having seized it, not fearing large, expansive emotion but letting it come out when it must."⁴²

The detachment that goes with art is important to the actor in his development. I have said that the actor is the expressive material of the theatre, and that the actor's self becomes a part of the material of his art. Because of this, it is probable that at least a part of Bentley's distrust of the direction of the very naturalistic Actors' Studio method acting and its emphasis on inner feeling is that it is excessively internal. It depends overmuch on the actor's own neuroses which are too directly a part of his own personality, too close to be distanced as art. In addition, the focus on self limits the actor from achieving the technique and versatility needed for stage acting.⁴³

Dealing with the personality as part of the artistic material is different from simply exhibiting the personality. In the former case there is activity, in the latter passivity (like the artist's model). Bentley describes two types of "personality" in acting, one of them intimately related to real personality, the other distanced from it, as though aware of its function as medium. He describes the process whereby the personality is transformed from the real to the aesthetic in this way:

For once an actor has his technique (i.e., is an actor), his individuality shows itself. He has shed everything that passed for his personality in the days when personality meant the part of him that was accessible to his conscious mind and to the minds of fans and publicity men. He now has his personality as an artist. The one persona is an obstacle, the other an instrument. 44

Another way of looking at it is to say that the actor must pass through the outer layers of personality in order to reach something deeper, more essential, and more useful for artistic purposes. Bentley finds an example of the aesthetic "supreme personality" in Martha Graham (who, we note, as a dancer is freed from dealing with the complexities of linguistic personality): "Graham is not an ingratiating person without art but an austere, unprepossessing, forbidding person transfigured by art."⁴⁵

As with playwriting, then, the hack actor is doomed to live with neurosis while the artist transfigures it into art. The hack actor must substitute various levels of personality for technique and aesthetic substance. Some may substitute their name or fame for acting. Bentley places Judith Anderson in this category: "Her personality is not something defined by her acting. Rather we are invited to admire her acting because she is a personality. . . ."⁴⁶ That is, one does not focus on

the artistic, but on some other quality, like glamor. It is similar to the recent condition of looking at a Rembrandt and being able to see only the six million dollar price tag. Another substitution for art involves the performer in establishing "an indirectly erotic relation with the audience," allowing or requesting the audience to love him because he is so beautiful or wonderful or ingratiating.⁴⁷ This substitutes another level of personality--a desire to be loved--for the truth of acting a role. Only by becoming a medium for the art does the actor achieve both identification with the role and the distance from his own personal attitudes necessary for art.

If the actor creates an illusion of reality distanced by awareness of the art (as Langer says, "it is part of the artist's business to make his work elicit this [distanced] attitude"),⁴⁸ then this is repeating that acting is an art. In order to fulfill the conditions of art, the audience must be aware that the actor is expressively portraying human personality within a complex expressive and artistic structure. In this situation, the actor's ability to achieve a believable portrayal ('believable' being a metaphor), to submerge his personality into the dramatic role, is itself a distancing device: we admire this capacity. The actor, says Bentley, "is not exhibiting the role alone, he is exhibiting his prowess, he is exhibiting himself."⁴⁹ Not the self of the personality, but the self of the artist, the technique or virtuosity.

Bentley suggests a psychology of acting in which there is focus inward on the self as well as outward on others. He says that Olivier could not portray Justice Shallow "if there were not a Justice Shallow

in Olivier, if Shallow were not something he might yet become, or might have become. In such roles, the actor is exhibiting the many different possibilities of being that he finds in himself.⁵⁰ That is, the actor's search for truth is not the imposition of form on the material of personality or self, but the exploration of many possibilities of character within the self, the recognition of an identification with some other.

The inner search is the psychological base of acting, but it must be supported by technique and knowledge of the needs of the drama, for the actor must serve the drama. This means presenting the play to the audience in a well-formed manner. Technique is necessary for the actor, for it supports all understanding of the "tone and rhythm" of a work and the communication of that tone and rhythm to others by means of voice, body, and movement. Technique will show the best way to play a scene; it will allow discovery and expression to take proper form. If the naturalistic portrayal of emotion should become so violent as to cause language to be garbled, for example, Bentley suggests a technique for playing both emotion and language. It is an example of true theatricality in drama as opposed to inchoate blather and uncontrolled emotionalism. Given a scene where great emotion must be played, along with an important speech, Bentley suggests that "whatever men really do at such a moment, a stage character might assume a strange and improbable calm. Then we can listen to him. A skillful actor can always suggest that there are all kinds of things behind such a calm."⁵¹

Great acting does not "come alive" on the basis of technique: it is the technique which supports the discoveries of the artist/actor. In his discussion of acting, Bentley comes close to belying the emphasis

on mind and intellect found in his discussion of drama. Although he is aware that an actor may work up a performance by thinking it out well, he is also aware that the grasp an actor can have on character and role may have little to do with conscious mental activity: "Whether by painstaking calculation or lightening intuition, she has worked out a series of stances and movements, of accents and intonations, which are right for this character in this play."⁵² The intuitive leaps of creative imagination, little explored in Bentley's writing, come to the fore in his view of acting perhaps because the art of acting has such a deep psychology and cannot easily be interpreted on the basis of rational intellect. Bentley is aware that in acting an intellectual understanding of the script may not be necessary, and he quotes a story about Bernhardt to this effect:

A friend of mine . . . was present at some of the rehearsals of Hamlet and he told me that once or twice Sarah Bernhardt consulted him as to the meaning of a passage. He said what he thought, and she answered in a way which showed she had completely misunderstood him and had perhaps not even listened. The process was repeated two or three times running, the misunderstanding growing deeper and wider. Then, he said, she went on to the stage and played the passage in question not only as if she had understood the words he had explained, but as if she had had access to the inner secrets of the poet's mind. ⁵³

The mysterious and difficult which Bentley admires in art come, perhaps, from the artist's ability to grasp intuitively, which ability is conclusively demonstrated in this passage and the work of great actors generally.

Interpretation and the Director

Bentley remains a traditionalist where the function of the director is concerned: "Traditionally, the style has been set by the poet, not the stage designer, nor the director, nor even the actor, all of whom have to adapt themselves to the style of the writing."⁵⁴ He speaks of the director as an "interpreter" who takes a coherent piece of art, the play, and "works to see that unity is faithfully reproduced" in theatrical terms.⁵⁵ Interpretation does not mean that the director's task is the simple and somewhat passive setting of actors into roles, for the play has a complex form which must be understood and theatrically shaped. Nor does it mean that a director must be slavishly devoted to everything the playwright has written, especially if the play has faults. And again, interpretation cannot mean that the director injects into a play his own very personal interpretation, for all conceptualization about the play must take the playwright's words as primary. Interpretation is the careful and intricate discovery of the form and meaning of a play and the realization of a theatrical presence for what is discovered. The job of the director is to ensure the living presence of the work of the playwright.

Bentley is aware of the great importance of the director in the modern theatre, as well he might be considering his analysis of the fragmentation of modern society: a director is necessary to help mediate diverse plays for diverse audiences. Yet he is wary of the development of the director into a Craigian super-artist, the major theatre artist, as though this were "a giant step in the march of progress," as though, in fact, the theatre were progressing or

evolving "even though it is obvious that the history of the other arts is not."⁵⁶ As we have seen, he views with disdain the rampant theatricalism which was the legacy of Appia and Craig and the nineteenth century enthusiasm for the director. The substitution of design and direction for language and acting constituted an aesthetic re-definition in the theatre which Bentley hopes to counter. The work of directors such as Reinhardt and Meyerhold is, for Bentley, the prime example of this detached (from the play and from reality) theatricalism.

There is another, more technical and less violent in impact on the play, shift in modern theatre's use of the director. That is the continual addition to a play of the qualities of the director, as though no play could exist without directorial help. Bentley describes this as occasionally useful:

Until recently it seems to have been assumed that a director would merely re-inforce an author's effects, accenting what was already accented, to A adding more A. Our more sophisticated theatre prefers to give a play "the treatment"--adding to quality A a directorial temperament or idea of quality B. If a script A is deficient, and B is precisely what is needed to make good the deficiency, the partnership of author and director is a triumph. 57

The difference between a Meyerhold and a Joshua Logan is that the former uses the play as a starting point for his own artistic vision and creates something quite different from the drama. The latter makes judgments about the play and does what is necessary to improve the production. Bentley tends to approve of this second kind of work, in that its focus is on the betterment of the drama. He approves especially when he is working as a director with material he considers problematic:

Both critic and director are aware of faults, but whereas it is the critic's job to point them out, it is the director's job to cover them up, if only by bringing out a play's merits. It is not true that a director accepts a play with its faults on its head, that he must follow up the playwright even into what he believes to be error. He cannot be a self-respecting interpreter without following his own taste and judgment.⁵⁸

When this kind of direction begins to take over a play, however, it begins to take on the function of playwriting, as in the case of Elia Kazan. Bentley considers Kazan to be the quintessence of the modern director, vitally in tune with his environment, "the incarnate spirit of the age; I would call him a human seismograph if there were a seismograph which would not only record tremors but transmit them."⁵⁹ When Bentley wrote that he'd heard that Kazan was "virtually co-author of A Streetcar Named Desire and Death of a Salesman even to the extent of changing the character of the leading persons," Kazan wrote back that he had not written one line of either play. Bentley responded: "It seems to me that if a director helps to create the very idea of a character--changing it from what it was in the author's original script--he is co-author--even though the creating and changing has been done without recourse to new dialogue."⁶⁰ This is the extent to which Bentley defines playwriting; it is a reasonable extent.

Since Kazan is not a theatricalist or a formalist in that he focuses on character and action in the drama, and since the result of his work in production is to create good drama and good theatre, Bentley generally approves of this collaborative work.⁶¹ He can also project the qualities of a good director like Kazan into a play where he finds them lacking, for example, The Crucible: "Mr. Kazan would have taken this script up like clay and remolded it. He would have struck fire

from the individual actor, and he would have brought one actor into much livelier relationship with another.⁶² Bentley's lionization of Kazan--to the extent that in the New Republic reviews Kazan emerges as the most exciting phenomenon on Broadway--seems in part possible because Bentley first encountered the Kazan-directed plays in the form he gave them; they did not exist as masterpieces where directorial tampering is also common and, according to Bentley, less often fruitful.

Bentley says that the classics, like Shakespeare, need special care and "interpretation" to make them speak to a modern audience, and he suggests two methods to "revive" a play, only one of which pertains to the director:

Let us not underestimate the difficulty of revivals. To exhume a work is not to revive it, however prettily you dress up the skeleton; to breathe life into it you must either recapture the spirit of the original or by new insight create new life. A revival should be either a return to the essentials of the original or new departure on the wings of a new inspiration. 63

Bentley prefers the first method, that of the director. The second method--Brecht and Weil's Threepenny Opera is an example--requires the skill of great playwriting. Productions that impose a "concept" on Shakespeare often do the plays an injustice. What is necessary in the first case is a search for the real values in the Shakespearean script and their emphasis on the stage. The director cannot "let Shakespeare speak for himself" for a number of reasons, the most important being that a Shakespearean play, like any other drama, is a vision of life and has a meaning. The proper presentation of this meaning is the interpretive work of the director. The director, like any artist, works from the core of the meaning-structure to form

the production. This work cannot be merely "technical" because that leads to under or over interpretation: either he does little more than add clear speech or he adds so many obvious touches to "doll up" the production that "too crass a separation is made between technique and content."⁶⁴

The process of interpretation is one of articulation and clarification, the transmission of the play to the audience. The work of the director is on the form of the play, and when he does not highlight and give distinction to this form, then "nothing is prepared, nothing held back for suspense, nothing articulated, nothing underscored. In a word, nothing is interpreted."⁶⁵ In Shakespeare, as in other plays, the essential work of the director is to assure the successful progress of the story (hence the importance of plot and structure) by making the parts clear and textured. Each image in a play must be made interesting both in itself and in relation to the flow of the whole.

Shakespeare's works demand special attention because so much of the meaning-structure is submerged in poetic language and may be lost to us both culturally and linguistically. The director is free to cut from the plays, but only to the extent that the play retains its coherence, for masterpieces are "organic and integrated structures" and will only withstand a limited amount of tampering. Bentley suggests that Shakespeare should remain unproduced if the director cannot find within the play under consideration something meaningful to the modern audience--and he stresses that the meaning must come from the play and not be something imposed on it. Imposed interpretations generally

yield inferior drama, such as Orson Welles' anti-Fascist Julius Caesar, in which a strained allusion to modern events destroyed the meaning of Shakespeare's conflict: "Since Fascists are bad, and anti-Fascists good ex officia, it cannot be so very interesting to get to know either party: all we have is a crude melodrama made pretentious by forced allusions to current events."⁶⁶

Interpretation is the presentation of the play in theatrical form; it is not the explanation of one idea in the play or even one idea about the play. Focus must be on those qualities which the playwright intended the play to have as they emerge from the words of the play. Bentley feels that to focus on the action and the characters of the play is the method of discovering the meaning. In reviving Shakespeare, the director should return to the realism of the characters and relationships as they lead to the action, for this is the center of the drama. By returning to this center, Bentley believes that a director can avoid the limited view of Shakespeare which is almost certainly the outcome of directing an imposed idea or a single "concept" of the plays. Though Brecht's collaborations with Shakespeare are valid in theory as playwriting, there are few directors who qualify, as does Brecht, to deal with the Bard in this manner. But that is no matter, says Bentley, for good direction is all that is necessary: "I maintain that the bulk of Shakespeare remains viable unchanged if the responsibilities of interpretation are not shirked."⁶⁷

The director should not feel slighted in the artistic process if he does not impose his views onto a script, for interpretation is not a mechanical process of fleshing out the desires of the playwright.

Since the director is primarily responsible for giving form to an image, a specific piece of theatrical art, his job will have a strong imaginative side and will depend on the kind of exploration and discovery that marks the creative process in both playwright and actor. The director's guides are his craft or technique and his "theatre-poet's intuition" which helps him to follow through on the artistic process of the playwright.⁶⁸

Bentley suggests that the director is not merely a craftsman, working toward a perfectly conceived finished product, and he is aware of the crucial creative period of the rehearsal. Bentley, along with most modern theatre practitioners and theorists, sees the rehearsal period as the most necessary element of play production, a time to search for and discover the specifics of form/content in the play by theatrical testing, something which cannot be completely thought out beforehand. In this process, the director is partly a guide, partly a co-creator with the actor, adding the final and necessary stamp of unity and coherence on the production. Bentley describes the creative aspect of rehearsal:

He [Welles] had done his homework, and come to rehearsal with a clear outline. At the same time he had not made the mistake of filling in the outline with a content imagined at home in isolation both from the particular actors concerned and from the creative state established in rehearsals whenever the morale is good. The director who does his work at home is a sculptor modeling with hard clay. It takes rehearsal--and rehearsal with the proper psychological adjustment--to soften the clay and present him with a really malleable medium. And the creativity of rehearsals consists in the way in which one thing leads to another. The director receives his "inspirations" out of the things that happen there. His spur is the spur of the moment. A fine production comes into being as a chain reaction starting with the first rehearsal. 69

This is a description of the director working as artist. Though he follows the design of the playwright, there is immense variability

in the theatrical image--one might say it is infinitely variable--when a series of speeches are given human presence in a theatre. The director need not impose a concept on the play to become an artist, for he is an artist by "merely" interpreting the playwright. He is an artist who works in the medium of actors, space, and time, gradually developing a formed image. He does not make form of chaos, for he already has formed matter, but he must find much within that matter: attitudes, sequences, movement patterns, and emotional levels that correspond to the motives and actions of the characters. He must make the words of the play come alive in theatrical terms.

Bentley, as we have noted, does not like the obtrusive flourishes of pure technique which are "those pieces of ingenious interpretation which call special and gratuitous attention to the director, . . .".⁷⁰ As with the play itself, form and content should be wedded; the director, when he has done his work well, will not appear in the play in interpretive frills, unusual concepts, or pseudo-intellectual attempts to explain the play. The meaning of the play is in the play and not in what the director has added to it.⁷¹

Bentley's concern for intellect and ideas is a concern for the play, and he stresses the difficulty of real ideas as opposed to a kind of cleverness he calls "Bright Ideas." "A Bright Idea is an invalid idea which has more appeal to the semi-literate mind than a valid one; a phenomenon of some importance in a culture whose diagnostic is semi-literacy."⁷² Bright Ideas, being common in our culture, also intrude upon our drama, either injected into the play by the playwright or imposed on the play in the form of clever "concepts" by directors

who haven't thought out their work or who are not very smart. Changing Chekhov's Russia to the U. S. South may have some point in trying to make a Chekhov play more accessible to an audience,

the idea being that domestic affairs are more real to an audience than foreign affairs. It may be a true idea; all that's wrong is that it doesn't apply to matter in hand. In context it is only a Bright Idea. 73

Excessive interpretation is problematic in that it becomes a substitute for the play, an example of theatrical form taking precedence over dramatic content, of pleasing surface over substance, an example of negative theatricalism. When strong, stylistic direction, like that of Tyrone Gutherie, is very good, then it becomes more important than the play.⁷⁴ Any play can be made exciting and vigorous by a director like Gutherie. But the best director's very important interpretive work remains in the core of the drama and out of sight. His work on form follows Bentley's concept of ideal form by receding to the background while the content, the play and its content, are featured.

Scene Design and Lighting

In a sense, that Bentley addresses it so seldom and, when he does, rails so against its excesses, one might say that the theatrical milieu as represented by settings and lights is the least important element of theatre production in his theory. In another sense, however, the absolute necessity of its unity with the play's production makes this milieu both central and crucial and demands that its role be properly played. That role, of course, is the presentation of the core of the drama which is why scenery and lights must, like all other theatrical

elements, follow the design of the play. As closely related to the drama, scenery and lights are best when they take the form of drama which Bentley prefers, an expressive realism which avoids the extremes of naturalism and anti-realism. In accordance with his general aesthetic, neither scenery nor lights should call attention to themselves, nor should they be sunk in a decorative or decadent style, but should evoke the life and reality of the drama.

It is with scenery and lighting that the full impact of Brecht's influence on Bentley is clearly visible. It is the one place where the practice of Brecht's Narrative Realism stands forth as a coherent theory of the stage by itself, without combination with another theory, though as a method which "stands midway between the two extreme methods of the modern theatre, which we may call naturalism and symbolism." Naturalism, as we know, interests Bentley little because of its slavish devotion to external detail. The dangers of stage symbolism (in settings) lie in its capacity for "artiness and cuteness," for calling too much attention to the non-realistic devices themselves, like the pantomimed doors and chairs for cars and trains in the plays of T. Wilder.⁷⁵ (Wilder, stripped of his wistful expressionism, is sentimentality pure and simple.) The anti-illusionism practiced by Brecht, however, is theatricalist while allowing reality to be penetrated and exposed: the essences depicted are distanced by art without loss of the realism and "imitation" which are basic principles of Western drama. The theatre is exposed as a theatre, the lights are exposed as lights, and the scenery is exhibited as scenery; but it is all designed to represent an action from life.

Bentley's basic aesthetic demands a connection with life, a realism based on the everyday world (rather than on some "higher" reality), but it is compounded with an expressive sense of beauty. His aesthetic admits the balance and pleasing unification of design, but it also calls for a disjunctive and forceful quality much like that achieved in the Brechtian settings of the Berliner Ensemble. It is a controlled and forceful sense of design, angular and distinct, more line than color, more solid than airy. It is the outcome of his preference for the clear and the concrete over the vague and insubstantial. It is more masculine than feminine.

Bentley's harshest commentary on stage design is saved for the unreal when it takes the form of a belabored and surface style which is Baroque, lavish, and "gorgeous." It is a style which he finds in 1950's productions of Shakespeare in Britain going hand-in-hand with a gentility which has nothing to do with Shakespeare. An all-encompassing gentility and gorgeousness can only touch the surface of Shakespeare's plays, and thus a lushly done up Turkish-style production of Twelfth Night does nothing more than obscure the substance of the drama.⁷⁶

The gorgeous style is no more correct when it proceeds from the style of the play, for it is always too "aesthetic" and too self-conscious. He finds the pretentious theatricality of Cecil Beaton's set for The Grass Harp to be "ridiculous," an example of style gone soft: "elegant, dandified, and, it must be said, effeminate."⁷⁷ If the purpose of Capote's play is to reach a Higher Reality, he cannot understand how this Reality is to be demonstrated by billowing silk, pleasing colors, and delicate figures which are the correspondents of pretentious prose and trite thematics. It is only natural that there would also be limits to the opposite of the gorgeous: the spare, dark style which, Bentley

suggests, may come from the social theatre's distaste for the "esthetic" (an attitude generally shared by Bentley himself), "If one complains of some designers that they are painters who do not know stagecraft or the drama, one might make the opposite complaint of Mr. Gorelik. . . ."⁷⁸

A knowledge of drama and stagecraft are, in fact, primary qualities for the designer. In his own way, the designer must be an artist in the theatre, searching for the expressive form for the ambience of the play. It is not literal depiction of scene, but evocative portrayal the designer is about. It is not decoration and the qualities of painting that the designer must deal with, but the elaboration of space, an element of the medium of the theatrical work of art. Bentley, regardless of his protest against Appia, is not immune to Appian concepts as they flowered in America with Jones, Simonson, Meilziner, and Aronson. He finds a pinnacle of American design in Boris Aronson, whose "joyous wit and controlled fantasy provide a desperately needed alternative to . . . excessive, oversophisticated gorgeousness. . . ."⁷⁹ For Bentley, Aronson is able to mix the concrete and the symbolic in a manner worthy of the true theatre artist, capturing the clarity and grappling with the mystery that is inherent in the greatest art. Bentley is impressed by Aronson's interpretation of The Master Builder in visual, stage terms:

Boris Aronson's set is lofty in conception and clever in execution. American stage design is usually competent and often brilliant, but Aronson (alone?) is an explorer--an explorer of the stage as a medium and of the play as a mystery to be guessed. . . . he contrives to have the best of both the worlds, the abstract and the representational, the symbolic and the actual, very much like the Norwegian master himself. 80

While Bentley is certain that the scenery's texture, its form and style as representation of the content/design of the drama, must be fused with its function as a space in which actors play, he is more willing to set lighting apart as a primarily functional element of the theatrical design, subverting all form to this function. The Appian use of lighting to create both texture and meaning in the theatrical milieu takes, in Bentley, secondary position to the audience's need to see the actor, not just well, but very well:

We have to learn to use lights for the central purposes of the theatre. This means neither limiting them to the simulation of natural appearances nor letting them run wild in an orgy of independence nor switching them off because one loves darkness. The center of dramatic performance is the actor, and the center of the actor is the actor's eyes. We need to see them. It may even be . . . that the actor needs to see our eyes too. 81

The need to see the actors' eyes necessitates much light. It is a completely Brechtian concept of lighting; it sees the purpose of lighting the play as illuminating, in a very direct way, the drama. Brecht wanted, simply, a "revealing flood of white light covering the whole stage."⁸²

Bentley criticizes all lighting which is dim, atmospheric, uneven, constantly changing, and which calls attention to itself. That is, he condemns both naturalistic lighting which seeks to achieve dark nights, dim afternoons, and dusky corners and symbolic lighting which strives to create effects by lighting changes, varying levels, and color. The desire to see the actor, to see his eyes, is the functional reason for this. The anti-theatrical reason is similar and clear from above: too much lighting creates its own theatrical effect, apart from the drama. It is on the lighting that Bentley's anti-theatricalism has

its strongest effect, even though there is a certain, limited theatricalism in the Brechtian flood of light. While scenery is allowed to enhance and follow the expressive function of the drama, lighting is designed mainly to make it sharply visible. It is Brecht's sense of illumination, not Appia's.

More than any other part of his theory, Bentley's view of scene design and lighting seems borrowed rather than pondered and developed. His appreciation for American scene design seems to flow freely from the fact that the non-realism of European theatre made significant inroads into American design while the drama in America remained resolutely and even dully (as Bentley himself notes) realistic. Nowhere else did the Appian flavor touch our theatre so directly, especially not in acting, which has a tendency toward the naturalism of the Actors' Studio. So it is with the designers like Aronson that he senses a great fusion of abstract and real. That Bentley will not recognize the deep affective shadings offered by mood in lighting seems almost willful. Or perhaps he knows this and attacks it only at an excessive point. Certainly the exposure lighting preached by Brecht is not appropriate for every play, but Bentley is less concerned, at this point, with an aesthetic of lighting. His view is based purely on function.

Notes

1. Bentley, What, pp. 175-6.
2. Bentley, Search, p. 163.
3. Bentley, Thinker, p. 188.
4. Richard Schechner, "Approaches," in Public Domain, p. 63.
5. Bentley seldom finds this to be the case, as in his comments on Grotowski's The Constant Prince: "The inner meaning of a three-act masterpiece cannot be translated into any one-act dance drama. Its meaning is tied indissolubly to its three-act structure." War, p. 383.
6. Bentley, Thinker, p. 50.
7. Bentley, Search, p. 14.
8. Charles Morgan, "The Nature of Dramatic Illusion," in Suzanne K. Langer, ed., Reflections on Art (London: Oxford University Press, 1968), p. 92.
9. Bentley, Thinker, p. 194.
10. Ibid., p. 74.
11. Ibid., p. 174. Note, however, the importance of "superficial."
12. Bentley, Search, p. 51.
13. Bentley, Thinker, pp. 193-4.
14. Bentley, Search, p. 49.
15. Bentley, Thinker, p. 194.
16. Bentley, Event, pp. 176-7.
17. Bentley, What, p. 67.
18. Morgan, "Dramatic Illusion," p. 98.
19. Suzanne K. Langer, Feeling and Form (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1953), p. 325.
20. "Historically, of course, performance was not something added; it was that from which dramatic art grew." Bentley, Life, p. 149.
21. Bentley, Commitment, p. 172.
22. Bentley, Search, p. 63.

23. Bentley, Life, p. 182.
24. Ibid., p. 172.
25. Bentley, Event, p. 46.
26. Bentley, Search, p. 43.
27. Bentley, Life, p. 171.
28. Bentley, Event, p. 216.
29. Ibid., p. 79.
30. Bentley, Search, p. 77.
31. Bentley, Event, p. 84.
32. Ibid.
33. Bentley, Life, pp. 169-70.
34. Ibid., p. 153.
35. Bentley, Search, p. 4.
36. Bentley, Event, p. 173.
37. Bentley, Search, p. 75.
38. Ibid., p. 67.
39. Ibid., p. 75.
40. Ibid., p. 140.
41. Bentley, Event, p. 96.
42. Bentley, What, p. 186. That is, even the Stanislavski/Actor's Studio method accomplishes a certain search for essence.
43. However, not only is this method of acting useful for a particular kind of 1950's American drama, it has also proven appropriate for film.
44. Bentley, Event, p. 81.
45. Ibid., p. 122.
46. Ibid., p. 179.
47. Ibid., p. 214.

48. Langer, Feeling and Form, p. 318.
49. Bentley, Life, p. 154.
50. Ibid.
51. Bentley, What, p. 190,
52. Ibid., p. 31.
53. Ibid., p. 163. Bentley is conclusive on this subject in "Portrait of the Critic as Young Brechtian," Theatre Quarterly, VI, (Spring, 1976) p.6. "Its as well they [actors] don't theorize at all, because their theories wouldn't be much good. They go on hunches and intuitions and professionally-trained habits."
54. Bentley, Life, p. 78.
55. Bentley, Thinker, p. 15.
56. Bentley, What, p. 115.
57. Bentley, Event, p. 104,
58. Bentley, Search, p. 222. Bentley makes these comments in reference to his production of O'Neill's The Iceman Cometh.
59. Bentley, Event, p. 152.
60. Ibid., p. 108.
61. Kazan's work is a revelation for Bentley but its over-powering theatricalism leads to resentment, on Bentley's part, for Kazan's increasing formalism and a certain moralism. An extreme description of Bentley's feeling for Kazan might even be "love-hate." Consider: "It's no use knowing he is not a good director unless you can also see that he is almost a great one." Bentley, Event, p. 109.
62. Bentley, Event, p. 93.
63. Ibid., p. 141.
64. Bentley, Search, p. 110.
65. Ibid., p. 120.
66. Bentley, Life, p. 93.
67. Bentley, Event, p. 36.
68. Bentley, What, p. 161.

69. Ibid.
70. Bentley, Search, p. 39.
71. In this matter, Bentley is close to the ideas of David Cole (The Theatrical Event), whom he resembles in few other respects. Cole sees the play as a special world which must be apprehended, and should not be "explained" to an audience.
72. Bentley, Event, p. 70.
73. Ibid.
74. Bentley comments on Gutherie in "A Director's Theatre," What, pp. 112-6.
75. Bentley, Search, p. 138.
76. Ibid., p. 136.
77. Bentley, Event, p. 21.
78. Bentley, What, p. 37.
79. Bentley, Event, p. 182.
80. Bentley, What, p. 48.
81. Bentley, Search, p. 143.
82. Ibid., p. 142.

CHAPTER IV
BENTLEY ON AMERICAN THEATRE: SELECTED REVIEWS

Bentley called his second collection of New Republic reviews "A Query in Chronicle Form,"¹ cognizant that they were more than fleeting journalistic mementos. He uses Lessing as his model, for in Lessing's work

each particular review is part of a larger and more permanent enterprise. Through the length and breadth of his reviews Lessing was stating a philosophy of the drama . . . he was conducting a polemic, and . . . he was conducting an enquiry. He was fighting off what he firmly held to be wrong, and he was constantly asking himself what he held to be right.²

This philosophy has been the focus of the previous chapters; now I will deal with some specifics of the query as Bentley recorded them.

The purpose of this chapter is to examine closely several complete examples of Bentley's critical work to see how he applies his theory to matters of form and content within the context of a particular time and place: the New York theatre in the early and middle 1950's. For Bentley is a critic interested not only in plays, but also in the whole relationship among playwrights, audiences, and society. In the weekly theatre review, Bentley must deal concisely with all the factors (form, content, and their relation to life) that impact on the drama. Because the plays are often new, it is difficult for the critic to gain perspective on them, and therefore the ongoing nature of critical enquiry and the relationship to a shifting context are more acutely visible.

Since Bentley is a critic in the American theatre, concentration here will be primarily on American drama and the society which it mirrored in the 1950's. Emphasis will be on the drama and Bentley's view of it rather than on sociology; Bentley's analysis of society will filter in through his reviews. Although he is known as a champion of Europeans like Ibsen, Pirandello, and Brecht, Bentley is an astute observer of American drama. The pervasive style of American drama in the 1950's was realistic, but the realism was often a surface phenomenon, unlike that of the great nineteenth century realists like Ibsen. Bentley addresses himself to the nature of this American realism, and his New Republic reviews of American plays are, in effect, a consideration and study of the problems of realism, a task for which he was, by training and inclination, well suited.

Three kinds of plays will be looked at through Bentley's reviews: 1) those which he considers works of art or at least to have qualities of art, represented here by two plays each of Arthur Miller and Tennessee Williams; 2) plays which he considers works of craft and genre entertainments and which catalog the major faults of Broadway drama; 3) a European play, Waiting for Godot, which has such unique qualities that its impact in America is noteworthy and which makes a test case for Bentley's theory. All of these are representative of Bentley's search and stance. Since he is no "rave" writer, even his discussion of plays he likes contains considerable notation of their problems; his method is the close analysis and open discussion of the play and the production.

Miller and Williams: Two American Artists

Although he recognizes the quality of both Arthur Miller and Tennessee Williams, Bentley is no propagandist for their work as he was, for example, with the overlooked Brecht. Both Miller and Williams were well-represented to the public and their reputations were established by the early 1950's, an essential condition of Broadway's need to codify and enhance a promising writer's position for commercial purposes. Bentley deals with them calmly, with a discerning eye, pointing out deficiencies and searching for new meanings, attempting to allay the forces of hyperbole which surround a popular American dramatist and tend to inflate his worth.

Nevertheless, Bentley emphasizes the importance of a play by either author because their plays are engaged with the problems and temper of the times. The plays are not only better than most, but they belong "in the mainstream of our culture. Such an author has something to say about America that is worth discussing."³ This engagement is one of the major qualities of an art work for Bentley, and though both authors are engaged, he sees the nature of that engagement as different. Bentley believes that Miller's focus is toward an examination, a criticism, of the social order, while he views Williams as more psychologically oriented. His treatment of their plays follows this division.

Bentley's discussion of Arthur Miller's The Crucible and A View From The Bridge relates to his broad conviction that Communism has a hidden presence on Broadway, cloaked in the vagueness of a generalized liberalism, and therefore protected because it is never dealt with openly.⁴

Although he recognizes the evils of Stalinism, his stance is less anti-Communist than it is pro-honesty: events and ideas must be discussed. He does not think that Broadway intentionally harbors Communism, but that it generally avoids any confrontation with ideas which might disturb the placid waters of conventionality.

Bentley is therefore distressed at Miller's insistence that his plays are not about contemporary American politics and society, especially when Bentley and others see them as imbued with themes of false accusation, confession, betrayal, and informing. Bentley thinks these themes have a direct relation to the political struggles of the period: the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) hearings and Elia Kazan's appearance before the committee as a friendly witness, naming names. When Miller writes a play like The Crucible, which can most obviously be taken as an allegory of purity and innocence for all those who are unjustly accused, and then denies this reading, Bentley is suspicious that Miller either obfuscates the true nature of his play or that he has a perverse inability to see it. He concludes that Miller is naive about the complexities of the issues he is, somehow, dramatizing.

Bentley is basically excited about The Crucible, but he finds problems in the form, as well as the content, of the play.⁵ He wonders why many more such committed and engaged plays are not written in America, and his overall reaction is that the 'material is magnificent for narrative, poetry, drama.' And yet the material is not quite mastered in form, not completely realized in dramatic terms: 'The

individual characters, like the individual lines. lack fluidity and grace." Miller, he says, is burdened by having already been elevated to the position of a major artist, and thus strives, like O'Neill, for a grand style that he does not achieve.

But these problems in forming material do not arise of themselves, says Bentley; they derive from the point of view behind the drama (the pervasive thought which is exhibited throughout the work). Bentley calls this "the mentality of the unreconstructed liberal" which he sees as wrong or at least simplistic. This is an example of Bentley's desire to get to the issues through the play, of pushing aesthetic problems back to their source in life. Miller, he says, exemplifies the falacious view, common to American liberalism, that one is always innocent till proven guilty, as though there were no reason at all for the HUAC hearings. Only by assuming total innocence for all Communists could the situation of The Crucible parallel that of Kazan's appearances before HUAC. In believing this, Bentley suggests that Miller himself is possessed of considerable "innocence" of the complexity of politics.

The play does not offer an acceptable parallel to the 1952 "witch hunt," says Bentley, because of the disparity between the "crimes" of witchcraft and Communism--that one is by reasonable definition not a possibility, while the other may in fact involve some threat to the United States through policies of the Soviet Union. In this matter, Bentley remains non-extremist: he denies both the leftist idea that Communism could pose no real threat to America and the excessively

anti-Communist view which condemns as Communist "the activities of all liberals as they seem to illiberal illiterates." Where Miller's play errs, he says, is in failing to distinguish among the complexities of the Communism issue in America, such failure yielding only a melodramatic conflict "between the wholly guilty and the wholly innocent."

Furthermore, Bentley notes that the real life drama involving Miller's former associate Elia Kazan, with whom Miller broke both personal and professional relations after Kazan renounced his former Communism and named others in his "cell," does not correspond to the situation of the character in the play who chooses death before admission of guilt. The difference is, of course, that Kazan had been a Communist while Giles Corey had not been a witch. As Bentley says, the political reading of the play--that Communism was no more real a threat than witchcraft--could only be held by a Communist.

The artistic upshot of the Miller/Kazan split is the replacement of a "guilty" director (Kazan) with an "innocent" one (Jed Harris), says Bentley, and for this reason the production is not as good as it might have been. As Bentley sees it, Kazan is a better director and would have handled the relationships of the characters more adroitly and generally improved the play in production.

Eric Bentley is no friend of HUAC, but he is conscious of the complexity of the issues faced by Americans who had shown allegiance to the Communist Party.⁶ He would prefer to see these issues discussed than to see them dealt with cryptically and melodramatically. One suspects that Bentley also finds something despicable about the naming

of one's former or current friends, in front of fanatical anti-Communists, but not so absolutely despicable as in The Crucible. Read as a parallel of the events of 1952, The Crucible breaks down in a number of instances. One can only conclude, with many years perspective on the events, that the relationship of the play to HUAC and Kazan is essentially an emotional one for Miller; one also suspects that Miller, had he written about those events, could have done so more realistically. Still, in the heat of the moment, Bentley's focus on the drama/life connection is not unreasonable. The play is about Kazan, but not directly.

Bentley is apparently ready to concede this point in a note to his review of A View From The Bridge,⁷ a play which led him to renew his charges that Miller deliberately confounds the meaning of his plays, emphasizing their psychological content, perhaps to disguise a radical point of view for the Broadway public. In that significant note, Bentley shifts his stance somewhat to suggest that a writer is not necessarily consciously aware of what he is really writing about, that Miller, regardless of his feelings about a play, may have been dealing with material more personal, potent, and psychologically buried than he knew.

In his review of View, however, Bentley deals directly with it as relevant to the continuing controversy between Kazan and Miller.⁸ He contrasts the informer theme in Kazan's On the Waterfront and Miller's View (in the former, informing is good, in the latter, bad) and is dismayed by a sense that "both stories seem to have been created in the first place largely to point up" these differing conclusions. Since he

reads both works as efforts to support a position about an important contemporary theme--informing--he notes the flaw in each as melodrama and, more than this, pretentious melodrama. "In both On the Waterfront and A View From the Bridge, truth--life in its concreteness--is obscured by a fog of false rhetoric." The pretensions lie in the movie's soaring music and the play's poetic dialogue. The problem with Miller's poetry is that it is not, in fact, poetry, but an effort to inflate the importance of the play and cover its pretentiousness in "Sunday clothes."

Bentley adds to his review of the play a discussion of Miller's preface to it in published form, from which may be extracted a general criticism: Bentley deplores Miller's "surprising degree of isolation from the great debates which are the intellectual life of our time." That Bentley expects this level of involvement from Miller explains more about Bentley than about Miller and his play, but it relates directly to the matter of whether Miller is writing about social issues (with political import) or about individual problems. Although Miller says he wants to unite both social and psychological concerns, for Bentley he achieves only vagueness: "In fact, one never knows what a Miller play is about: politics or sex." Whenever one wants to pin Miller down about theme, he shifts, depending on the direction of the discussion.

To counter this, Bentley must show the futility of the intentional argument (that what Miller says his intentions were is what the play actually contains) by going to the evidence of the play and its reception, especially by the "left" press which took View to be about informing, regardless of Miller's published statements to the contrary.

It is at this point that Bentley indicates, rather in the breach, that he neither wants to accuse Miller of "disingenuousness" nor wants to limit his view of an author's intention to conscious intention:

Surely any play of substance has all kinds of significance, including some which were no part of the author's conscious intention. . . . The large fact is that here are two men who have lived within the orbit of Stalinism [Kazan and Miller], and here are their guilt feelings about it, outcropping in gigantic fantasies of self-justification.

Sometimes the public realizes what an author means before he does himself. Also, his work will take on meanings which he may not have anticipated: nor can all the meanings which works take on later be brushed aside as irrelevancies. 9

Bentley's argument is that what discerning critics find in a work is, in fact, there, regardless of the author's statements about his intentions. It seems that in the case of Miller's two plays about guilt and informing, Bentley builds a valid interpretation of their relationship to the events of 1952. It would be petty, however, to confine the interpretation to those events, as it is at a distance from them (the events) that both plays increase in stature. It must be an indication of the greater significance of The Crucible that its "drama of indignation" works quite well for those who have no knowledge of HUAC and 1952, that its action hinges not only on the melodramatic conflict between conventional society and the individual, but also on the inner conflict of Proctor's decision-making process. There are, in fact, multiple and complex conflicts in the play. There is no question however, that Bentley is correct in stating that on the basis of straight comparison, the play has only a limited relation to the case of Kazan and HUAC.

Perhaps had Miller simply declared himself a Communist, Bentley would have reacted differently to his plays, for at least then Miller would have been defending a clear position. As it is, however, Bentley is left to speculate about Miller's stance on Communism. He must presume Miller to be Communist because of the plot of The Crucible, and this seems confirmed by the fervor of Miller's attempts to deny any political importance in his plays. Following this presumption comes Bentley's criticism of the nature of Miller's liberalism, a sense of total innocence, an unrealistic look at humanity. But Bentley's greatest criticism remains that of Miller's lack of honesty about his political position.¹⁰ Bentley's criticism is well taken: if the purpose of art is to expose the truth, then the vision of reality Miller works with must be examined, and it is relevant to apply Miller's play to contemporary life. Bentley criticizes both form and content. It is as though Bentley, upset that Miller has not written the play he wished him to write, is further upset that he did not write it better.

Curiously, Bentley does not directly discuss in his reviews the conditions which more than likely force an obscurantist position on Miller. They are, however, present in his discussion of the overall absence of Communists or the reality of Communism on Broadway--it simply was not allowed. But then why did Miller deny what so many others saw in his plays? One answer is the atmosphere of fear prevalent in the country, especially among writers and film/theatre professionals, and most especially among those like Miller who knew they were prime targets for HUAC and knew they would refuse to comply with the committee--putting them in a very precarious professional position. Bentley could not know then of Miller's shifting stance on Stalinism, but Miller's hostility to HUAC remained firm.

Tennessee Williams is another of those playwrights whom Bentley sees as having something important to say about America. He finds it difficult to talk about the two Williams plays he reviewed without giving major attention to their director, Elia Kazan. In one instance this is because the play, Camino Real, is so expressionistic in form that it needs major directing input, and in the other, Cat On A Hot Tin Roof, it is because the play is too radical in its vision for Broadway and has been altered by the vision of the director. Bentley sees Williams as an important but problematic writer. He relegates Williams' plays to the realm of "psychological drama" which "springs from fear of the Other, of Society, of the world, and from preoccupation with the self." This emphasis on psychology has the effect Bentley usually ascribes to raw neurasthenics, that in being only a partial depiction of man, it "tends . . . not to become art at all but to remain neurotic or quasi-neurotic fantasy."¹¹

In Bentley's view, Camino Real exemplifies the fluctuations in form and content that mark Williams' abilities. It takes the extraordinary formalist and theatricalist talents of a Kazan to mold this chaotic play into a moving theatre experience. Bentley did not like the play when he read it "partly because it belongs to the current deliquescent-roccoco type of theatre and even more because it seemed far from a brilliant example of the type."¹² The production is therefore, he feels, more Kazan's work than Williams' because he did enjoy it in the theatre.

Bentley sees both "spurious" and "genuine" elements in Williams' work, generally. The spurious seems prevalent in Camino, and spurious elements include three things to which Bentley always objects. First, he dislikes Williams' style when it leaves the realistic center and becomes bloated and baroque: "When he is poetic he is often luscious and high-falutin'." Second, he deprecates Williams' thought or content as a regrettably mishandled mixture from D. H. Lawrence. Third, he sometimes objects to Williams' choice of material (perhaps flights of neurotic fantasy) which can be unnecessarily grotesque and base, such as "the short story of the man who likes being beaten and is finally eaten by a negro masseur. . . ."¹³

For Bentley, Camino Real (which he calls "Camino Unreal") contains a considerable spuriousness, for he says it "doesn't even pretend to realism." Because much of the play's language is the description of action rather than in the form of dialogue (he knows this from reading the play) it appears to Bentley more a "scenario" for a theatricalist-choreographic work than a drama.¹⁴ Bentley notes that Williams has argued the importance of such description of action, that "it may say more than words," but Bentley considers such an action meaningless except as given meaning by the director and actor. In Bentley's terms, then, Camino is not really a play, and he therefore has little to say about it as such. As a piece of theatre, Bentley sees much to admire in the work of Kazan, in the choreography, and in the fine, close-to-ensemble acting. The play however, with few "real" characters, little dramatic development, wildly inconsistent images, and many "solemn speeches" which "remain lifeless in performance," is of little interest.

The genuine elements in Williams relate more to the style and substance of Cat On A Hot Tin Roof. They are the realistic elements of language and style: "his ability to make eloquent and expressive dialogue out of the real speech of men and his gift for portraiture, especially the portraiture of unhappy women."¹⁵ On the genuine level, that is to say, Williams reacts directly to the world he observes and molds that world into an intelligible vision which expresses it and his feelings about it.

Although it is more genuine than Camino, Bentley still finds flaws in Cat which he feels may be attributable to the difficulties encountered by a writer like Williams--fresh, daring, not really in the commercial mold--when working on Broadway.¹⁶ The main difficulty in the play (and in Williams) seems to be fragmentation of interest, an inability to maintain focus, perhaps because his material and his point of view are too potent for Broadway. Bentley finds evidence of this fragmented focus and intent both in the play and, especially, in the treatment the director Kazan has given it.

The play, for example, seems to hold back from the subject of homosexuality. Bentley says he had heard that this was to be "the play in which homosexuality was at last to be presented without evasions on the author's part." But the play does not really deal with homosexuality, for although it is an early subject involving Brick and his dead friend, the play shifts focus to the subject of the father and his illness before homosexuality can be "presented." Is this the result of the Broadway mentality? Bentley does not even fully formulate this question, but it lurks, like the subject of homosexuality itself, in the background. There is vagueness here, an uncertainty which bothers Bentley.

Problematic in the opposite manner are the over-simplified emotions and motivations of the characters, dependent for the most part on "an obsessively and mechanically sexual interpretation of life" which Bentley does not believe stands up to much scrutiny. This ungovernable ascendancy of the libido is too much for Bentley's refined sensitivities--and his view of reality. Isn't sex a more subjective experience, involving persons as well as bodies, than this play suggests? Is suspected homosexuality so unremittingly terrifying that a man, once impotent, will commit suicide? "Surely the author can't be assuming that a man is either a hundred per cent heterosexual or a hundred per cent homosexual?" But one doesn't get a chance to ask these questions, says Bentley, because the play runs so rapidly over this material in "quick, if lengthy, narratives." He notes that "it is characteristic that the plot depends for its plausibility upon our not questioning that if a man and a woman come together once, a child will result." These are Bentley's realistic criteria at work, checking the relation between life and the dramatic form of the play.

Bentley concludes that the play and the production have a "relation of exact antithesis," the result of a shocking collision of different artistic attitudes. The play is basically sordid ("sometimes too naturalistically sordid for the theatre") and the production is "aggressively clean." He sees the function of this disjunction as the bowdlerization of a play that is probably more than the public can take--is even more than Bentley would want. Bentley is no particular fan of the

naturalistic portrayal of man's baser instincts, but he does not deny the existence of those instincts; he is not calling for smut, but for honesty. What bothers him more than the making-over of the play's surface (it "looks wholesome; therefore it is") is the attempt to change the play's attitude from an unacceptable pessimism to an acceptable optimism. Where the "script is resolutely noncommittal, the production strains for commitment to some sort of edifying conclusion." Kazan's work on Williams' play is an example of the power of the theatrical to overtake the dramatic, a power which Bentley feels should be used cautiously.

Bentley identifies some good writing in the play, Williams' language being consistently good, the finest in the current English-speaking theatre, "supple, sinuous, hard-hitting, and . . . highly 'characterized' in a finely fruity Southern vein." The finest moment of the play for Bentley also relates to language, or at least to the writing, as it solidifies in a theme. It is

a masterly piece of construction both as writing and as performance--a scene between father (Burl Ives) and son (Ben Gazzara) in which a new and better theme for the play is almost arrived at: that the simple old family relationships still mean something, that, in the midst of all the filth and incoherence and impossibility, people, clumsily, inconsistently, gropingly, try to be nice to each other.

Bentley praises the character of Big Daddy as Williams' "best male character to date."

Bentley, striving to say what the source of Williams' problems as a writer may be, identifies both a functional, authorial difficulty and a motivational or personality problem. As a writer, Williams' over-all fault has to do with a need to make his writing mean something,

a laudable goal, but difficult to achieve by conscious effort. This leads him into "fake poeticizing, fake philosophizing, [and] a straining after big statements." Bentley sees Williams' emphasis on emotion in his creative method as either an evasion or a misapprehension as to the psychological facts: "He has said that he only feels and does not think; but the reader's or spectator's impression is too often that he only thinks he feels. . . ." Williams seems confounded, in Bentley's analysis, by the form/content struggle seen so many places in American drama--the inability of the playwright to handle content within the confines of his form and the subsequent muddle he makes of both.

Williams' work is finally blunted by what Bentley sees as a quality in Williams' artistic personality, "an ambiguity of aim: he seems to want to kick the world in the pants and yet be the world's sweetheart, to combine the glories of martyrdom with the comforts of success." This is a perennial problem for the artist, having both a psychological and financial motivation--first, to be penetrating and shocking while having the public love you for it and second, to devote oneself to art and yet become rich and famous. It is a major difficulty for artists everywhere, but especially so where art and commodity are easily confused.

Bentley's final suggestion is the one he offers to any dramatist who strains after profundity: that Williams' must deal less with abstractions and more with realities, must "take the initial capitals off Sincerity and Truth . . . if ever his talent is to find a pure and

full expression." Williams has problems as a writer, but he also has promise. Where other American playwrights turn to pure craft and produce "hits" as a solution to and evasion of the demanding exigencies of art, Williams maintains the struggle with experience which enlivens his work. He has the qualities of a great talent; he cannot be dismissed.

Problems In American Playwriting

Bentley's reviews of the Miller and Williams plays treat them as serious works of art, but he is also adept at discussing plays which are not works of art. His reviews offer a thorough taxonomy of the problems of the American theatre; he ferrets out and identifies those approaches which make non-art or which cloud otherwise valid genre entertainments (for he is aware of the "art" in light comedy and melodrama).

Bentley discusses the nature of Broadway realism in serious drama, in a review of Robert Anderson's Tea and Sympathy, drawing a picture of the American theatre as a fantasy factory little different than that of Hollywood, except more daring because more exclusive in appeal.¹⁷ Even though a play like Tea and Sympathy may be technically perfect in production, it is still another product of an industry designed to "feed the appetite for consoling fantasy" in a fairly direct way. The psychology behind this appetite is a human need to compensate for some inner sense of wrongness or inadequacy, whether it be felt or unfelt. This is part of our total need for fantasy and suggests a good reason for the immense popularity of commodity entertainment.

Great art also deals with this need, says Bentley, since it first produces the fantasy--but only to break through to a greater reality, to transform fantasy into aesthetic material which forces new awareness (in, for example, the "fantasy" of Shaw or Brecht). In art, the fantasy does not remain comfortably distanced but touches the spectator more profoundly. Unfortunately, this level of work is seldom seen in the theatre, for "the everyday theatre is nothing more than a day-dream factory."

When theatre feeds escapist fantasy, it is romantic, even when it takes the form of realism. An audience, for example, suffering feelings of inadequacy may project themselves into a vision of power in an escapist play, whereas in a realist play the inadequacy itself will be dealt with, worked through. Because of this, there is a vast form/content split in much of the American theatre, where the form is realistic but the content is romantic/escapist. The difference between a theatre that pretends to realism and one which is frankly non-realist or romantic is precisely the former's claim to real significance. The problem with this false realism is that its ideas are bankrupt: "For the escape here is into pretended realities like ideologies and psychological notions and scientific fetishes."

Bentley feels that the distorted images which feed the public a sense of reality without dealing with the reality shift with the times. In the "social" theatre of the 1930's it was the world of the working class; in the 1950's it is the world of shallow psychology, often represented by a homosexual or the turmoil of a supposed homosexual. This the world of Tea, which "is about a private-school boy who is to lose the feeling that he is a homosexual by proving his potency with the housemaster's wife."

The formula for the drama of realist escape is to find how close you can come to shocking the audience with scandalous material, then to stop just short of dealing with that material, leaving it safely removed. Bentley calls it "Daring as Calculated Caution. Or: Audacity, Audacity, But Not Too Much Audacity." The playwright mines that area, created by shifting or progressing moral consciousness, in which an older, more conservative view might be scandalized while a newer, more liberal one will be more accepting. He places his material into this marginal zone to exact maximum effect from the audience's previously-developed attitudes and thus creates a play that seems daring but really is not. It is an example, in fact, of knowing the audience one is writing for so well that one is able to pull a certain level of excitement not from the material itself but from a pre-existing condition in the audience.

When this is done superbly, as in Tea, "a highly superior specimen of the theatre of 'realist' escape," one comes right to the edge of art without actually crossing to it. The spectator's accepting, uncritical attitude toward the play is the proof that it is not art, for Bentley always expects the art work to cause some real turmoil: "One doesn't ask the questions one would ask of a really serious play." In Tea these questions are the essential ones of realism, and the boy's innocence of the charge of homosexuality is the case in point: "One doesn't permit oneself the thought that he may not be innocent, for he has an innocence of a kind the real world never supplies: an innocence complete and certified." Motivations of all sorts need not be followed out, since so much in the drama is merely accepted. The playwright is in a very privileged position because, by skillful craftsmanship, he has constructed a smooth, seamless work that needn't confront the ambiguities of life.

What makes such a play work in the theatre is excellence in production, the power of actors and director to make it all seem like life itself. In this case, Bentley sees the certain hand of Elia Kazan. Much of the casting, acting, and direction is of such a quality that, in stage terms, the world of reality and art is occasionally reached in production--but only occasionally. Nonetheless, Bentley's disappointment is metered: "The script is far better than most; folklore and day-dream are scarcely less interesting than drama; and the work of Elia Kazan means more to the American theatre than that of any current writer whatsoever."

If the serious drama in America is often just realist escape, American light comedy is often marred by "an intrusion of crass sentimentality," an unearned and unjustifiable emotionalism. This is so, Bentley says, even though light comedy is the most successful American form, having become "one of the more vital elements of world theatre." Reviewing two generally worthy comedies, Oh Men! Oh, Women! by Edward Chodorov and King of Hearts by Jean Kerr and Eleanor Brooke, Bentley is disturbed by what he takes to be a need, by the authors of both plays, to add another dimension beyond that of humor to their work.¹⁸ This emotional new element seems ripe with a tone of moral uplift that has no place in the structure of the works themselves, is, in fact, an attempt to do more with the work than is necessary by adding a level of meaning greater than is desirable:

All of a sudden, the smile disappears, and we are invited to take a devout interest in the needs of children, the duties of parents, the responsibilities of spouses and psycho-analysts, not to mention the promptings of the heart and that Note of Hope which is the Broadway-Hollywood surrogate for a shot in the arm.

Bentley notes that both plays are based on the old theme of the professional imposter, and the plot of each is "one long attempt, on the authors' part, to humanize them by humiliation." That the protagonist of the Choderov play is successfully normalized while that of the Kerr-Brooke play is not is significant to Bentley. This places the latter work in a dangerous situation, since the accession to normalcy as the desired state of being is the staple of American theatre. As usual, Bentley is caustic about public reaction to something different, and he predicts that King of Hearts "will come in for criticism as being heterodox and heartless, if not dangerous and un-American."

Sure enough, he then quotes both Brooks Atkinson's and Wolcott Gibb's negative reactions to such a character, deriving from them the principles that 1) "a monstrous character has no place in light comedy" and 2) "a monstrous character has no place on stage." Bentley takes this opportunity to jibe at the Broadway aesthetic for its conformism and its ignorance of the classic methodology of comedy. On Broadway there is little acceptance of a truly unredeemable character because

implicit in New York journalism is a whole philosophy of drama according to which it is good that characters in plays be good--or at least likable; it is good that the playwright's view of life be: People are Nice. Sometimes this thought takes a political form and might be summed up as Democratic Good Will. At other times it seems to be a theory of audience psychology. "We must care about the characters." Well, that much is easy to agree to, but the New York theory of drama is that you only care when you also sympathize--or, in the jargon of the intellectual underworld, "empathize." With whom can you identify yourself? "Who are you rooting for?" Like football.

Yet the classic theatre is full of unsympathetic characters, and to redeem them in the last scene would be mechanical and a sentimentalization. Bentley therefore praises Kerr and Brooke for avoiding this level of

sentimentality, for allowing their character an organic--and very traditional--comic existence. He also praises the traditional method of acting this character by Donald Cook, who keeps his performance and the character separate so that the audience may appreciate the work of the actor while abhoring the character.

Like sentimentality, the mechanical injection of moralizing is, according to Bentley, a pervasive flaw in American genre pieces. He praises Joseph Hayes' The Desperate Hours as a thriller and is at least satisfied by the efficiency of its production.¹⁹ But the play's problem is that it has, more than good thriller writing, good intentions: "It is a thriller plus junk, and solemn, moralistic, pseudo-intellectual junk at that." Again, the content of this "junk" involves the moral strength of the "Common Man," the character with whom the audience is apparently to empathize, and it has little to do with the "thriller" form. It is the intrusion of preaching into the realm of commercial entertainment and must be considered a flaw.

Likewise, Bentley points to Sidney Kingsley's Lunatics and Lovers as an example of how "American farce is marred by moralism. The American farceur may begin by thumbing his nose; he will certainly insist on saluting the flag in the last act." Bentley is himself no dark and brooding pessimist, but he finds excessive the socio-political pressure in American comedy--even in the extremes of farce--to maintain a spirit of uplift. It denotes a misunderstanding of the method of farce, to act as though the pounding of institutions like marriage, family, and government common to farce are too serious an attack and can only be enjoyed if, at the end, the author and the characters add that they really didn't mean it, that it was all in good, clean fun. Bentley's work on farce

points out how psychologically valid the irreverence of the form is, and, in theatrical and dramatic terms, Lunatics and Lovers shows how jarring and wrong such last minute conversions can be: "Since Mr. Kingsley has made us feel that the joke against respectability and sentiment is such a good one, we are not heartened at the discovery that he himself is respectable and sentimental." As Bentley describes it, there is an almost Nietzschean transvaluation involved in farce whereby its scurrilousness, when pure, needs neither justification nor apology:

Lunatics and Lovers has been described as a "dirty show."
But it is also a clean show. And personally I found the
dirt . . . a good deal cleaner than the cleanliness.

The earnestness behind moralizing has a finished and preordained quality that Bentley sees as a foul addition to art and light entertainment alike. The spirit is alive in well-crafted thrillers and farces; these genre are about excitement and vitality--even frivolousness--and can only be deadened by the mortifying presence of an earnest sanctity. Perhaps it is the continued presence of puritan piety, heavily layered into conservative, post-war America, to which Bentley reacts. We have seen that he will not allow earnestness to be substituted for either value search or vitality. Even the traditionally moralistic melodrama, he says, suffers from the "odor of earnestness." When, even in melodrama, the author finds it necessary to fill out the villain with psychosocial explanations (always, it seems, the wrong ones) of his badness, when farce 'must be given overtones of a pep-talk on the 'American way of life' or a class in civics,' then the vitality of the forms is vitiated. The validity of genre such as melodrama and farce lies in their form, not in some imposed meaning.

Bentley, searching for an example of a "current melodrama with many farcial elements and totally without moral or philosophic pretension," offers Agatha Christie's Witness for the Prosecution as such a gem. The problem with the American public is that it may be deluded enough to think that a dose of moralism and bad ideas is more meaningful than a good story told with skill and wit: "If our society considers that writers like Mr. Hays make a larger contribution than writers like Mrs. Christie, our society cannot distinguish between earnestness and seriousness, intellectuality and intelligence."²⁰ Seriousness and intellect are not, cannot be, qualities which an author injects, as such, in a play. And thrillers like Witness are better for not attempting a spurious intellectuality. Because Christie knows this, and because she writes with real style and wit, she demonstrates a more essential intelligence.

Bentley suggests that social forces in the background of Broadway commercial plays are the sources of the infusion of non-aesthetic material into so many routine entertainments. The Broadway audience seems to want, and the Broadway management in compliance gives, a certain level of edification to every play, as though, sensitive to the charge of shallowness, they inject meaning everywhere. It is a testament to the unsettling character of even genre works, when they attain a level of "art," that they are mitigated by moralism.

Concentration on the audience, especially the idea of a mass audience, often develops in the playwright an interest not in persons, but in some construct of what is basically an abstraction: the average man. Writers try to focus on a generalized idea of the audience. Bentley returns many times to criticize the continual focus on the average,

unremarkable man in American theatre. In his review of Paddy Chayevsky's Middle of the Night he makes this criticism central, questioning the idea that the theatre's purpose is to hold up images of the common or average man.²¹ In part this point of view is an extension of his criticism of naturalism, of "literal transcripts of life," and in part it relates to the search of the artist for distinctive qualities rather than non-distinctive; art seeks in every case to transform the ordinary or average.

The purpose for so much focus on the average man seems to Bentley to be the ease with which audiences recognize the ordinary--and he concedes that recognition is important in drama. But the recognition should not stop at the surface. The idea of "average" is anathema to the drama. Bentley says that Chayevsky, though he elaborates the surface of reality capably--especially in the form of language--does not transcend the surface. He does not make the transition to drama because, though he develops themes, he lacks real vision.

Chayevsky's themes have the homebody appeal and the simplistic approach of journalistic advice-columns and radio talk shows, says Bentley. Having a theme should be something greater than the crude psychology of the mass media; an overall point of view should emerge from the material--and in Chayevsky, nothing emerges. He offers merely an extended image of common people. For this reason Bentley says that Chayevsky's identification with his audience is so complete that he "doesn't even bother to write characters; he writes audiences. . . ." It is much like the business world where products are not sold, but people are sold on products: a focus on the customer. But writing with the audience in mind, an "intended eulogy to average humanity," backfires because such

writing is contrived and, though perhaps average enough, inhuman. But this may be enough, Bentley says, for an age of "salesmanship and conformity" where the average man seems the most desirable unit. The artist, however, "is interested precisely in the non-averageness of the person stigmatized as average." This may be something that Chayevsky would understand, since he is intelligent, but in his writing he delivers only "the average and not the unique, the preaching and not the truth, the facts and not the life of facts."

Bentley identifies the political view behind most serious themes on Broadway as a generalized and inoffensive liberalism which contains major elements of optimism and uplift. This liberalism tends to be vague and good-hearted, seldom taking on issues that are controversial (for controversy might split audiences or cause them to be seen as something other than a monolithic mass). This political orthodoxy controls the treatment of subjects like homosexuality even when the supposed intention of the dramatist is to treat it squarely and humanely.

We have seen Bentley's implication that homosexuality crept into so many plays of the 1950's because of its innate shock value; mention a homosexual--or accuse some heterosexual of the inclination--and you appear to be daring even when you do not deal with the subject realistically. Bentley reviewed two plays that attempted to deal honestly with homosexual themes, one of which he feels was largely successful. In each case, he notes the effect of vague Broadway liberalism on the play.

Ruth and Augustus Goetz, the adaptors of Andre Gide's The Immoralist, put little of the novel or its author's aesthetic sensibility

into the play, says Bentley, because their main desire was not to dramatize the novel but to write about homosexuality, most likely as proponents of "a more rational attitude toward it."²² He applauds this purpose but points out that in the end the authors' humanitarian attitude is blunted, even vitiated, by an uncertain or open ending to the play. Perhaps the public of 1954, he says, is not ready for an unexpurgated look at the life of a married homosexual.

Taking the authors' purpose to be didactic, Bentley offers an insight into this kind of purposeful play, for it is precisely the point at which the authors have succumbed to the needs of the audience where their failure lies. Bentley says that a purpose like that of changing attitudes about so heated a subject as homosexuality requires a particular stance: the didactic playwright must suppose himself ahead of the public so that he "can write only plays that are more than the public can take." Staying within the bounds, the Broadway method, cannot be the method of the play Bentley assumes the Goetzes wanted to write. What they did write falls into a class of plays, similar to the realist theatre of escape, which he identifies as "Broadway liberal:"

There is a kind of liberalism which is safely reactionary. It offers you all the soft and self congratulatory emotion of reformism without demanding that you run the risks. The chief trick of the pseudo-liberal is to fare boldly forward toward the heroic goal, then to slink quietly off at the last moment in the hope that no one is looking.

Since this play, in the end, still considers homosexuality as an accusation (i.e., undesirable), it does not fulfill its apparent purpose. The public, says Bentley, will allow the subject of homosexuality to be brought up only as long as there are no real homosexuals

or they are washed clean of their stigma: "Our public's motto is: tolerance--provided there is nothing to tolerate." The Goetzes immasculate their theme and their hero by first understanding his plight, but then asking him to go and sin no more. This is their last-minute conformism, the deus ex machina of the American theatre. Still, the shock value which the play does have works in its favor. Shock value, as we have said, is dependent on the makeup of an audience, and Bentley notes among those at the theatre many who find the subject matter scandalous. For those who choose to overlook reality, he says, the play seems to "work."

Where The Immoralist shrinks from actually allowing a homosexual character his homosexuality, Third Person, by Andrew Rosenthal at least admits the reality of homosexual love.²³ In doing so, he follows Bentley's call for more homosexuality in American plays; that is, the subject should not be dangled and then snatched back but dealt with. Third Person went some of the distance toward dealing with homosexuality, though, to Bentley's way of thinking, it did not go quite far enough. Bentley criticizes the play for lack of clinical, sexual detail while citing its "narrowly psychiatric" point of view as a fault. That is, while the play held back on certain facts about the sex lives of its main characters which would have aided in clarifying their motivations and in presenting the real issue, "the primitive sexual needs of human beings," it also developed no larger moral and spiritual design. By this, Bentley means that the play developed no greater or overall context, no background against which the characters' lives and the play's action might be interpreted. He concedes, however, that the lack of such a background and the very desolation of the characters' spiritual

lives is realistic and therefore constitutes a kind of background: "His [Rosenthal's] richer sense of life must be implicit in his picture of their spiritual poverty."

Bentley gives a more complete description of the plot of this play than he usually does because he hopes to show that the play's ending is not another corny evasion, but a realistic view of the events, given the natures of the characters and the situation. That the central character stays with his wife rather than opting to live with the beloved younger man is, for Bentley, a harsh reality in the face of the possibility of a romantic escape for the two men. In 1955, he implies, men stay married to their wives regardless of their love for other men,

That the ending is dramaturgically based on a "crude device" (a melodramatically unanswered phone call) does not bother Bentley, for he sees the point as "humanly sound." The play's creaky dramaturgy is overcome by the extent of its seriousness, its truth to reality, and the quality of its "low-pitched yet intense and intelligent dialogue." Yet for all its honesty and intelligence, the play also has the faults associated with stopping short: "When one accepts the play as the serious document that it is, one cannot but wish that it were even more serious." Because of the play's evasion of the facts of the characters' sex lives, Bentley sees what is probably unintentional support only for non-sexual homosexuality, which dulls the edge of this good play.

In the matter of sexual candor, Bentley is only asking for honesty, not for the innate shock of such disclosures. He praises the direction of the play for its moral tone, "keeping the show clear of any possible

charge of scurrility or even cheapness." Bentley wants honesty sensibly presented, neither too coarse nor too refined. He wants all the characters and their relationships clearly defined, but he does not want a play which deliberately sets out to shock in the easiest and most direct way. The shocks which Bentley wants are those which proceed from dramatic situations honestly portrayed, which lead an audience into new awareness. While arguing in favor of seriousness and honesty, he argues against any cheapness in the form of the drama.

One genre form, a staple in the American theatre, generally receives praise from Bentley, for he is not immune to the pleasures afforded by musical comedy. But they are limited pleasures and seldom dramatic. His negative reaction to the musical is seldom to the better examples of the form, but is to the overblown analyses of its importance as an art representative of the mind and soul of America. Bentley criticizes the agrandizement of the musical, the rhapsodic praise lavished on the form by popular writers and even some intellectuals as uniquely American in spirit and the highest achievement of, indeed, the proper form for the American stage. He adamantly opposes the theory that the drama should not be considered an important or necessary art form in this country and that, in the absence of a viable drama, the musical delivers a "theatre that is sheer, ample, and without inner tension or quarrel," an honest portrayal of America.²⁴ Bentley certainly must question the seriousness of any art that is "without inner tension" and the reality such a picture of America could possibly encompass.

Rather, he sees the musical as proceeding from the sentimental as much as the comic tradition, full of the same uplift that is liberally laced throughout other American genre entertainments. And it is as a genre that he explains the excellence of such a musical as Porgy and Bess: "a major achievement in a minor genre."²⁵ Bentley's forays into genre criticism, like this one, proceed with awareness that genre distinctions are "purely verbal." Still, such distinctions do make sense. Is it not more reasonable and fair he asks, to compare Porgy to the work of Sullivan and Johann Strauss than (as some have) to that of Mozart and Wagner?

The musical does not escape the realistic and sociological perspective in Bentley's criticism. As a popular and populist genre, he notes that the slight dramatic action in them usually depicts an idealized image, "the meeting and mating of the common man with the common woman."²⁶ This is the same glorification of the ordinary which he sees throughout American drama.

In the case of Porgy, Bentley criticizes the original view of the Negro in DuBose Heyward's novel, a view which also makes its way into the musical. That view "is certainly close to the traditional and dangerous image of the negro as primitive and the primitive as savage." When Porgy, therefore, commits murder and is not treated by the author in compliance with "the accepted code of poetic justice," it is not because of cynicism where this code is concerned but because of a gulf between the author and his subject. Heywood's "people are not quite human beings--they are likable, if not housebroken, animals, among whom killing is not murder."

In the translation to musical, says Bentley, Gershwin added a level of beauty that transformed the unconvincing prose and inauthentic realism of the novel into legendary folk-tale by giving the story the "reality of fantasy." This is a quality common to all musicals, the un-reality of song instead of speech indicating a world of fantasy in every case. Like all musicals, the focus of the theatrical experience of Porgy is not so much on the events as it is on the pleasing form of the music, what Bentley calls the "power of musical comedy as a convention." In musicals we have not a vision of reality but the Romantic vision of unreality made formally acceptable by music. We do not have a completed action or a "tragic or comic whole" because "the tradition of the musical is not that of music drama [opera], it is that of operetta, vaudeville, and review. . . ." Therefore, the form tends to arrange its effects cumulatively rather than developmentally, as in the drama, and for Bentley "the cumulative effect" of Porgy "is not more impressive than it is exhausting and benumbing."

Bentley's acceptance of the musical is based, then, on a hard look at its limitations as a form combined with a pleasurable reaction to its surface and stirring presentation of engaging performers--comedians like Bert Lahr, Phil Silvers, and Stanley Holloway; performers like Rex Harrison, Julie Andrews, and Cab Calloway. For him, the musical is stranded as a genre; it cannot become a serious form.

Innovation on the American Stage

There are three good reasons to focus here on Bentley's review of Waiting for Godot, even though the play is not American. First, his review does include a lengthy analysis of the American critical scene and background to the production in New York. Second, an impressive amount of Bentley's theory is brought to bear on the play and his judgment of it. Third, Godot was really the only new thing to come along during the four years that Bentley wrote weekly criticism, and so his reaction to it is a kind of test case for his theory. As testament to the general adequacy of Bentley's viewpoints, he did not "miss" this play which has become the one acknowledged masterpiece to have appeared, suddenly, in New York in the mid-1950's.

Bentley's review is divided into two parts, an examination of the critical and philosophical climate into which the play appeared, and a critique of the play and its production.²⁷ The first part is an account of the emotionalism involved in the "highbrow/lowbrow" division in American society and culture and its effect on the arts and on criticism. Bentley notes that highbrow serious writers are either bought or boycotted by lowbrow popular culture (he mentions Faulkner's pseudonymous stint in Hollywood), but the lowbrow taste-makers are full of resentment of the highbrow which creates unconscious guilt, and the "resultant disorder could scarcely be greater." Bentley himself is pulled into this conflict: he is often attacked by both lowbrows and highbrows, which suggests that his critical stance is at least flexible, based on facts and not on prior definitions and emotional responses.

And yet, he says, when a play like Waiting for Godot is announced in the New York Times to be for intellectuals he is fairly certain how the daily critics will react to it and is himself "propelled into writing a defense of the play as if by its success or failure civilization would stand or fall." The emotional force of the cultural struggle can affect even Bentley.

General critical reaction to Godot came about much as Bentley had suspected, for critics, like the public at large, are split about fifty-fifty for and against intellectuality. Yet he notes a difference in that while one group was "prepared to be respectful towards what was not fully understood, the second joined Mr. Kerr in finding something of a scandal in the very existence of difficulty." It is clearly Walter Kerr whom Bentley wishes to debunk, for Kerr represents an attitude--"the anti-intellectualism of an intellectual"--which Bentley finds especially distasteful. Bentley considers Kerr, who is not merely simple-minded, a worthy adversary for debate and argumentation.

The attitude towards Godot and life which emerges from the critical responses of Kerr and company--Bentley calls it "one of the big ideas of the twentieth century"--is that "it is best to be a simple soul because we live in a simple universe." That is, they criticize Beckett for making the simplicity of life complex and difficult. Bentley quotes Kerr's specific contention that Bert Lahr's ability to touch the simple truths that grow out of good entertainment is superior to Beckett's overwrought, inauthentic intellectualism. Bentley is aghast at this suggestion that "the superior insight of genius is unnecessary," that all the theatre needs is "constant communion with the man of non-distinction."

Bentley leaves his critique of Kerr at this point, noting that the highbrow/lowbrow conflict stands apart from the play itself, which poses its own problem for audiences, that of "nausea as a playwright's conscious attitude to life." He then presents a psychological and philosophical analysis of pessimistic nausea and its relation to art. This leads to an analysis of the nature of comedy and, specifically, comedy in America.

Nausea may be the attitude or position of the playwright, says Bentley, but Nietzsche points out that "the humor which provides amusement is precisely . . . a victory over nausea." That nausea is a major element in the background of much comedy is a fact which took the analyses of psychologists like Krafft-Ebing and Freud to point out. One function of humor is to "camouflage" a powerful critique of society. Bentley notes that "in this way, the humorist staves off punishment for his aggression," receiving, however, a "substitute punishment: to be discounted as unimportant." In addition, society is generally unwilling to accept the critique behind the humor as serious, society's way of not facing the aggression of the comic. Even in (or perhaps more so in) an obviously aggressive comedian like W. C. Fields, Bentley says, audiences delude themselves into thinking that the attack on bourgeois values is not really serious. In fact, it must appear not to be serious in order for the humor not to turn into outright aggression.

Bentley turns this analysis of comedy on the American scene: since American culture is prodigiously optimistic, its nausea is more buried than the European variety. America is swathed in optimism, and

if the conscious "thought" of "serious" literature and drama becomes more insistently "positive," a nation's humor, arising from the depths of discomfort, repression, and guilt, will become more and more destructive.

This is the condition behind the disparity between buoyant "American confidence" on the one hand and "blackly despondent . . . American cynicism." But since Americans refuse to openly acknowledge this fact, there is great "loathing and fear of any more conscious type of pessimism" like that which comes from Europe, particularly France.

Bentley is himself lifted by the concrete optimism of American pragmatism, but his is a philosophical leaning and not a sweeping dogma, need, or religion. He sees the general optimism in American society as somewhat deranged, in excess of the facts: America is neurotic in its obsessive optimism. Into this atmosphere comes a play calculated, it seems, to cause turmoil. Bentley's analysis of the American climate suggests that many would hate the play out of hand, that some would revere it with almost equal fervor. Bentley's criticism suggests that he does neither, though he may be somewhat influenced by his stance against Kerr to admire the play. He analyzes Godot on the basis of its qualities.

His analysis is astute, identifying much about the background philosophy, content, and form of Godot which an additional twenty-five years of analysis have probed in the process of conferring on the play the status of a masterpiece. Godot has most of the qualities Bentley looks for in a play, except for an ultimately realistic style and a clear, dialectical progression.

Bentley sees that Godot is not merely influenced by a philosophy, but is impelled by a pervasive philosophical point of view, for he calls the play the "quintessence of 'existentialism'" and offers a lucid, concise definition of this bleak method of viewing the world: existentialism is

a philosophy which underscores the incomprehensibility, and therefore the meaninglessness, of the universe, the nausea which man feels on being confronted with the fact of existence, the praiseworthiness of the acts of defiance man may perform--acts which are taken, on faith, as self-justifying, while, rationally speaking, they have no justification because they have no possibility of success.

Notably, he does not criticize this point of view--he has already suggested the possibility of conquering the very nausea inherent in existentialism (and much else) through art. Also, the practical results of an existentialist belief, man's need to bring value into the universe through his own actions, are similar to Bentley's pragmatism.

It is clear from Bentley's general theory of drama that the form of Godot, which he calls "undramatic but highly theatrical," deviates from his ideal. "Essential to drama, surely, is not merely situation but situation in movement, even in beautifully shaped movement." Yet Godot, like many other modernist plays, has a deliberately chosen non-dramatic form he calls "two strips of action . . . laid side by side like railway tracks." Bentley says there cannot be any drama because "the author's conclusion is that the two days are the same." I believe he is aware that this condition is what Beckett is dramatizing. Change is accounted for in the "play-within-the-play" says Bentley by the worsening fortunes of Pozzo the Master, change apparently limited to a pitiful situation becoming more pitiful.

Bentley identifies the theatrical style of the play, largely that of vaudeville and clown show, as the reason for its wide recognition. The form of the lowbrow entertainment has fascinated highbrow writers for some time, he says, but this is its first successful entry into art. The credit given to Lahr for the "rich" clown characterization is not his alone, but is largely due to Beckett's formulation of the specifics of that role.

Bentley concludes that Godot is an "important" play because Beckett has unified form and content in a manner which is new, and through this unification has more concretely given presence to the existentialist view in the theatre. His personal reaction, however, was not that of "revelation" or "sheer greatness." The reason he gives for this is that Beckett's "voice," though interesting, seems to be a repeat of so much else, not quite individual, a pastiche. Though the fact is external to the work itself, he notes that Beckett is perhaps over-influenced by Joyce. I would further speculate that Bentley's own reaction to the play may have been blunted by his awareness of form, by the fact that the form is not fully realistic. The lack of a full presentation of social context in the play may have hampered full appreciation. He is aware that this is a new kind of play, philosophical yet concrete, theatrical yet not formalist. He seems able to deal with it more directly through his intellect than through his perceptions or emotions.

The play contains the essential quality which Bentley considers necessary: "the sense of a unified and intelligible image of life." Bentley therefore defends the play against any charge of undue obscurity--it is obscure only "as any rich piece of writing is obscure," so that further "meanings . . . will disengage themselves in time. . . ." The image of life is delivered in concrete detail, and he therefore also defends it against the charge of "excessive symbolism," noting that the "chief relationships . . . [are] so concrete that abstract interpretations are wholly relegated to the theatre lobby. He gives us, not tenents, but alternatives seen as human relationships. . . ." The play is neither too abstract nor too removed from life.

Bentley relates the reason that so many conflicting "answers" can be found in the play, religious, anti-religious, et cetera, to what he takes to be Beckett's stance. He puts Beckett in that large class of writers who "retain religious impulses and longings, but have lost all religious belief," which accounts for a large amount of religious symbolism in the play and its religious flavor. Beckett writes then, not as an atheist but rather as a sceptic, and it seems that this openness of view is what Beckett wants. People err, says Bentley, when they assume Beckett to have taken one specific stance for or against religion. This is to say, I believe, that for Bentley Godot achieves, if not the dialectic of moral/ethical search which he admires in Ibsen, at least a moral/ethical presence in which the individual spectator, like the individual generally, may make decisions based on a concrete appreciation of the situation (as seen by Beckett) of life.

In discussing the production, which he finds very good, Bentley extends his view of the nature of the play. He calls the actor who played Pozzo "mismatched" because he "gave us a playful stage villain instead of a stomach-turning real one," which indicates Bentley's feeling for the need for realism in the production. There is something grotesque and horrible about the Pozzo-Lucky scenes of the play, perhaps, and they should be emphasized as distinct from the clown and vaudeville style of the bums.

He stresses the fact that Beckett's play was in no way "saved" by Bert Lahr's comedianship. The comic instincts developed by Lahr over many years on the lowbrow stage did, however, allow him to move naturally and easily into the style of the play, bringing a largely created style to bear on the role, fitting into it comfortably. E. G. Marshall, on the other hand, had to create his role whole cloth, as it were, and thus the effort remains visible. Lahr's clown is the "perfect execution" of the author's intentions, filling out the idea of the playwright. At the same time, the playwright gave Lahr such exquisite material that it "made him larger and richer than he had been, perhaps ever, before." The poetic repetition of "Like leaves," for example, so beautifully delivered by Lahr, can become poetic only by "preparation in the dialogue itself." Thus, Bentley sees no disjunctive meeting of the opposites (intellect and instinct, perhaps) in the production, but a conjunction of complementary impulses which make theatrical sense in presenting a carefully prepared drama.

Bentley is clearly impressed with the language of the play and wants to see it rendered. He therefore criticizes Alvin Epstein's first-night performance as Lucky for throwing away the long speech parodying Catholic philosophy, a fault which had been corrected by the second performance. On the other hand, he says that he would have "lopped off" the last part of the first act and made cuts where the "dialogue stumbles." That the entire play was performed as written, however, impresses him, since "reverence toward a script is a good fault and, on Broadway, an unusual, almost exemplary one."

In a like manner, he praises the overall care that the director Herbert Berghof gave the play, leaving a personal imprint without recourse to a stock of tricks, an imprint "subtly interfused" with the texture and mood of the play and not residing merely in blocking and business. What Berghof gave the play became more evident when Bentley later saw a French production which had been overseen by Beckett himself. This production lacked the sense of a director's work, and the comic element, vast in both the play and in the New York production, was lacking in Paris: "It was avant-garde and existentialist theatre with a vengeance: everyone was having a marvelous time being miserable."²⁸

The Paris production did reinforce Bentley's feeling that Lahr and Marshall were miss-matched in the New York production, that Vladimir is as "weighty" a role as Estragon. Having Vladimir older than Estragon (rather than the other way around in New York) works better, he thinks "for then Vladimir's philosophizing can be characterized as a little senile, which prevents them being solemn and tendentious."²⁹

Bentley's awareness of the importance of this bellwether play, and his explanation of that importance, is a credit to the broad capabilities of his theory. He recognizes the play's worth in its concrete closeness to lived experience, yet recognizes that the play cannot be traditionally dramatic because the dialectic of drama (conflict and resolution) does not reflect the play's particular view of the world. Bentley concludes that Beckett, in finding a theatrically viable form for his particular existentialist view, has created something new and significant.

Notes

1. Subtitle to What Is Theatre?
2. Bentley, What, p. x.
3. Bentley, Event, p. 90.
4. Bentley, "The Missing Communist," in What, pp. 165-72.
5. Unless otherwise indicated, references to The Crucible from Bentley, "The Innocence of Arthur Miller," in Event, pp. 90-4.
6. This is amply evident in his book of selections from the HUAC records, Thirty Years of Treason, (New York: Viking Press, 1971). Bentley's view of the Committee is unrelentingly negative, while his feelings for witnesses like Elia Kazan are tempered with sympathy for their plight. Like many others heavily influenced by Marx, Bentley separates Marxism, and Socialist philosophy generally, from the repressive practices of the Soviet government and Joseph Stalin.
7. Bentley, What, pp. 222-4.
8. Unless otherwise indicated, references to A View from the Bridge from Bentley, "On the Waterfront," in What, pp. 98-102.
9. Ibid., p. 223.

10. Years later Bentley clarified his position on Miller: "I felt that there was cryptic communism in Arthur Miller's playwriting, which some people took to mean I was attacking him for being a communist: but I was attacking him for not being open. It later turned out that the actual truth was more complicated than that even, that he was changing his mind by then, from one view of communism to another, but trying to do it privately." Bentley, "Portrait of the Critic as a Young Brechtian," p. 7.

11. Bentley, Event, p. 259.
12. Ibid., p. 107.
13. Ibid.
14. Ibid., pp. 108-110.
15. Ibid., p. 107.
16. References to Cat on a Hot Tin Roof from Bentley, "Tennessee Williams and New York Kazan," in What, pp. 53-63.
17. References to Tea and Sympathy from Bentley, "Folklore on Forty-Seventh Street," in Event, pp. 149-53.
18. References to Oh Men! Oh, Women! and King of Hearts from Bentley, "Who Are You Rooting For?" in Event, pp. 226-9.
19. References to The Desperate Hours and Lunatics and Lovers from Bentley, "But Junk is Junk," in What, pp. 43-6.
20. Ibid., p. 46.
21. References to Middle of the Night from Bentley, "How Not to Write an Audience," in What, pp. 117-21.
22. References to The Immoralist from Bentley, "Homosexuality," in Event, pp. 205-8.
23. References to Third Person from Bentley, "Marriage, 1955," in What, pp. 103-6.
24. Bentley quotes George Beiswanger in Thinker, p. 238.
25. References to Porgy and Bess from Bentley, "A Major Musical," in Event, pp. 111-14.

26. Bentley, What, p. 133. In his review of My Fair Lady, Bentley questions whether this need be so.
27. Unless otherwise indicated, references to Waiting for Godot from Bentley, "Undramatic Theatricality," in What, pp. 148-58.
28. Ibid., p. 231.
29. Ibid.

CONCLUSION

Basic to Eric Bentley's theory of the drama is a vision of the world as natural, pluralistic, and susceptible to man's rational efforts to create value and meaning. This empiricist, humanist, and progressive view, common to both pragmatism and Marxism, sees the world not in terms of abstractions and rational systems, but in terms of facts and concrete situations. It is within each situation encountered that man finds value. Value is not an individual property, but is tied to a relationship among the various members of the human collective. Bentley uses the cell-organism analogy to suggest the relation between individual and society: it is one of interdependence whereby the cells (individuals) should not develop independently of the good of the organism (collective).

This general view of the world and humanity is based on a conception of man as whole and healthy in relation to himself and to other men. But two factors mitigate against this view and complicate the search for value in the world. First is the insight Freud gives into the nature of man's self-understanding and his knowledge of others--which suggests that one of the hardest things man can do is to know himself and take reasonable account of others. Second is Bentley's analysis of society, which he sees as fragmented and divided. Men are split from their own true natures. Therefore, man's search for value is deterred by the

pressures of society and by his own willingness to accept value systems which, because they tend to ossify and become dogmatic, can only be a part of the truth. Bentley sees modern, bourgeois culture as especially prone to cause man to deviate from a search for truth and value and into habits and conventions that answer man's immediate needs but tend to separate him from himself and from others, especially where the cooperative responsibility for society (as opposed to competitive interest in self) is concerned.

Bentley therefore adopts the Marxist attitude towards bourgeois culture, that it is an assault on vitality and humanity, and with this the Marxist view of art, that it can and should be a corrective to the general social situation. Succinctly stated, art has a different status in bourgeois and socialist cultures: "For a middle-class state, art is a luxury, when it is not an investment; for a socialist one, it is the indispensable sign of the reintegration of a fragmented, alienated existence."¹ This analysis, it must be noted, is not unique to Marxism, for it has always been apparent to those who value art highly that its effects run deep into the values of a society. Art is a realm for dealing with values concretely, says Bentley, and this is in itself enough to begin to revitalize the human being, to make him aware of his own human potential. Integrating man with himself and society, making man whole again, bringing things alive: these are qualities of art which are revered by more than Marxist commentators.

Bentley's view is that art must spring from the whole man and not from any single part. It is also part of his desire to erase dualities and be inclusive rather than exclusive. Art and drama must, therefore,

include the intellectual and the emotional, pleasure and learning, intensified experience and a sense of truth about that experience. Art in general, and drama especially, is formed to give an intense and pleasurable experience--since an awakening to life, however shocking, is always a pleasure. There is much man can learn from the experience, and it will affect both his emotions and his intellect.

According to Bentley's way of thinking, the artist is an exemplary human being in that he is self-motivated to search for values that bring awareness of the expressive and meaningful (human) nature of the world. He struggles with experience and that struggle is expressed, along with the experience, in the art he creates. He forms an account of experience in such a way that the chaos of life is set apart and ordered in such an intelligible manner, that others may encounter the specifics of his search. The artist has an essential curiosity about life and the audacity to challenge the conventional. The art he makes, therefore, is basically subversive to existing systems in that it asks questions, accepts little on faith, and looks for the whole truth that is seldom encompassed in single systems.

Bentley concludes that the art of the drama is in an especially good position to perform the function of vitalizing and integrating a fragmented society in that "high theatrical art is more accessible to the new untrained audiences than perhaps any other high art whatsoever."² This is because of the directly realistic style which he sees as proper for drama: the performed drama, of all the arts, deals most directly with the essence of lived reality because its materials,

language and men, are one with its human subject matter. The candid presentation of the real world (social reality) is right for the drama and offers a specific image of life.

Bentley's major interest is in the content of the drama, the view of life which comes through the play, but content must be wedded to a form. In the realistic drama the form/content relationship focuses on conflict situations which are drawn from reality, the personal or social life of man. These conflicts are the source of moral/ethical ideas in drama. since the forces in conflict are ideally representative of the greater moral conflicts of life.

Because the progression of the play seeks to resolve conflict, Bentley calls this central form/content fusion a dialectic. Dialectic is the manner of the drama through which the playwright works in order to discover the value of a particular situation. The dialectic is not to be a pre-determined statement about life, but must be a true working out, since the play develops on the Aristotelian, organic model where characters have their own lives within an action which is not manipulated to an end, but grows to its own completeness.

Beauty resides in both form and content for Bentley, which is to say it is engaged with life and society. The expressive quality of drama is linked with beauty, which is not merely an elegant and removed sense of form, but a view of life in its detail. The well-formed does not mean the ideal, but an expressive vision of the real. Much of what might be considered ugly is transformed into beauty by its power to express a vision of life. Beauty, then, is not passive or gorgeous; it is active and engaged.

Although it is an image of the real, drama as art seeks to achieve some distance from the dramatic as it appears in life. Drama is not life but a vision of life, enhanced and transformed into art. Its purpose is to put life in perspective and give a particular kind of experience, vivid and complete, which reflects life but is actually found in very limited quantity in life itself. Because modern man is cut off from life, modern art tends to be a vigorous expression of values from life designed to break through to the human center. Drama should not attempt to break through directly, by shock effect or by attempting to directly cross the barrier between art and spectator. Crossing this barrier destroys the attitude of distance between the spectator and the material. This attitude allows the spectator to establish a much more intimate and personal contact with the drama, one tinged with awareness of the quality of art as well as the relationship to life. This is, for Bentley, a reflective state where the spectator is able to both become intimately involved in an experience and, at the same time, to retain some perspective on it.

Bentley's emphasis on content over form transfers to the production of the play, where the play becomes content--with the suggestion of a form inherent in it--and the arts of theatrical presentation become the physical form it takes. Bentley, already suspicious of form when it appears without content, is aware that the elements of theatrical production can be pleasing and potent to audiences, even in the absence of plays that have real value. For this reason his focus is on the play and its content rather than the undeniable power of the actor, the director, and the design of the stage milieu.

Bentley of course sees the art in the arts of the theatre. All the theatre artists are involved, as is the playwright, in forming an expressive medium. The work of the actor is perhaps most difficult and most crucial, for the actor is the link between play and production. The actor, unique among the arts, works very closely with his own personality, which is to be washed of purely personal characteristics in order to create aesthetic material. He also must be unusually open, identifying within his own character the possibility of portraying other characters. This process is so complex and unresponsive to direct control by the rational faculty that Bentley simply calls it intuitive.

The director and the designer also work as artists, not on the chaos of life, but on the already-formed material of the play to give it a physical, stage image. Their work is not mechanical because they have much to discover in their own media, space, time and motion. Bentley especially deplores formalism in directing, but he allows and admires the mixture of the realistic and the symbolic/expressive that characterizes the best American stage design.

These are the main features, led by a conviction that the play has an important content or meaning to communicate, that Bentley brings to his analysis of the American theatre. His critique of American drama is based in large part on its position as a commodity for commercial consumption. It does not deal with value or vitality through a meaningful play, but accepts the status quo and is actually hostile to the nature of true art. Even in the vital genre forms of melodrama and farce, where a desire to deal with violence, to act out suppressed desires,

and to criticize the moral norms of society is prevalent, American theatre tends to mitigate these qualities with sentiment and moralism. Within his criticism of American theatre, then, lies a criticism of American society, even when the plays themselves do not focus on social problems. In fact, it is the lack of serious focus on such problems that forms the basis of Bentley's critique.

As a comprehensive theory of drama, Bentley's has its limitations. Generally, however, he points them out in advance. One limitation is a lack of interest in the search of the avant-garde formalists whose inner search and abstract formal search lack the element of content and remain removed from the intellect and understanding. Bentley calls this the "other" school, some elements of which he incorporates into his own theory, but whose extreme stance, at the point of formalism and loss of social responsibility, he disavows. He cannot accept, for example, Artaud's attack on the rational: art for him is irrational. Bentley can take some of Artaud "with a grain of salt" but his theories are not ultimately acceptable to Bentley.³ Bentley relies on definition to mark the limits of his theatre. Drama has the qualities mentioned above; other forms, which may be valid, are not actually drama. They may be music-drama, dance-drama, musical-choreographic pieces, and the like, but they are not to be considered within the confines of his theory, notwithstanding its breadth.

But search at the edges of realism has never been a significant part of the American theatre, which has remained, at least until the late 1960's, basically realistic in form (if not, as Bentley points out,

in content). What Bentley brought to the American theatre was a critical attitude and an approach to a theory of realism unlike any that was then commonly applied to American plays. American theatre was full of pretension, and in a generally bleak landscape, much that was only mediocre or good was lauded as great art--a fact which several decades of perspective have confirmed. The craftsmanship in American theatre was good and quality craft works were the staple of Broadway . . . but was it art? No one seemed to be asking this question, at least not openly, till Bentley came to stir matters up. This is why Bentley's important work seemed especially significant. It was strong and it was negative, and both those factors brought him to the public eye. He had something controversial to say, and there is a certain excitement in controversy.

Fortunately for Bentley, he was also right, or at least seemed to be right to enough people, for his importance as a critic was widely heralded early in his career, despite some detractors. He became important because he was among the first to speak out about the state of American theatre, though what he did was by no means revolutionary in content. He took the, by then, relatively established tough and critical view common to literary criticism and applied it to the drama. He began from the premise that dramatic works could be seen as a part of culture, could be a "repository of values," and this view was immediately accessible to one part, at least, of the academic community for whom the intellectual analysis of literary works and other art works was a fact of life.

Having opened the door, Bentley kept it open with hard work. The sheer amount he published was important in keeping his name evident in the relevant publications, and his ability to re-publish enabled him, in a sense, to carve out a reading public for his works. His "search" for theatre gave him time for growth and new experience, his stint at the New Republic a regular forum. And his constant exemplification of his theory in the specific works he translated, published, and propagandized supported in a concrete way his ideas. It was not so abstract to call one thing bad when he could offer another specific thing as good. Through his work with Brecht and others his ideas reached a larger audience than that of the New Republic.

During the late 1960's Bentley lost interest in drama.⁴ It was a time in which all the things he disliked in "serious" theatre flourished; anti-intellectualism, anti-culture, and anti-drama were ascendent movements. The rise of Artaudian theories, self-expression, reinterpretation of texts for their "essences," the play as pretext, the relegation of the play to the status of "script," the articulation of the concept of theatre as theatre (not as a form for the presentation of the drama)--all of this kept Bentley out of the theatre. Combined with the rise of a theatre, begun in the 1950's, which saw life itself as unconnected, inchoate, and meaningless, there was a great challenge to Bentley's view of both the world and dramatic art.

According to Bentley's theory, however, theatre will return to its realistic center, which may have happened in the 1970's (as a testament to the validity of Bentley's point). The work of Shepard,

Rabe, and perhaps Mamet is close to the realistic center, though it is a realism influenced by the central ambiguity of Beckett and Pinter. It is possible that the American theatre has benefitted from some anti-intellectual freshness. Certainly the dominant theories of today center more directly on intuition, rather than on rationality, as the source of art. The work of Polanyi⁵ and newly-discovered dual-brain consciousness systems (right and left hemisphere thinking) has had an effect on dramatic theory that Bentley could not have foreseen. His study of intuition is relatively superficial.

Bentley has, and had, however, a crucial historical perspective in his criticism. Such a perspective is less fruitful today. His touchstones were Ibsen, Shaw, Pirandello, Brecht--playwrights who offered full conceptual models of man in society. Judged against these, playwrights like Sherwood Anderson--once considered just below Aeschylus and O'Neill, now almost forgotten--are relatively easy targets. Bentley's critical theory seems caught at the point of these historical touchstones. They were good examples of a theory used to judge Arthur Miller, but they seem less relevant to Harold Pinter.

This is to say that Bentley was a quintessential critic for his time. His theory, his philosophy, may be less relevant in its specifics today, but in general it may show the center to which drama inevitably returns.

Notes

1. Fredric Jameson, "Introduction" to Henri Arvon, Marxist Esthetics, trans. by Helen Lane (Ithica, N. Y.: Cornell University Press, 1970), p. xxiv.
2. Bentley, Commitment, p. 145.
3. Bentley interview.
4. Bentley, "Portrait of the Critic as a Young Brechtian," p. 11.
5. Michael Polanyi, Personal Knowledge, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958). Polanyi examines the role of intuitive thinking in rational, scientific research, as well as in the arts.

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BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

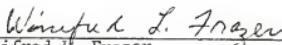
Donald H. Cunningham was born in Alabama in 1945 and traveled widely, as a young child, with his military family. He went to high school in Daytona Beach, Florida, and graduated with a B. A. in Classics from Florida Presbyterian College in 1966. After two years in the Peace Corps in Chile, he returned to earn an M. A. in Theatre at the University of Minnesota in 1970. He taught in and administered a program of adult basic education at Miami-Dade Community College, 1970-73, where he did work in counseling and psychodrama and ran a workshop in dramatics at the Miami City Jail. He returned, in 1974, to begin work on a Ph. D. in Theatre at the University of Florida. He taught theatre at Saint Leo College in 1976-77 and at Eckerd College in 1977-80 where he was Discipline Coordinator, 1978-80. He has acted and directed in both academic and professional theatre.

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This dissertation was submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the Department of Speech in the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences and to the Graduate Council, and was accepted as partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

June, 1981

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